

The Department Store Girl

**Based Upon Interviews
With 200 Girls**

Issued by the

**Juvenile Protective Association
of Chicago**

Text by

Louise De Koven Bowen

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THE DEPARTMENT STORE GIRL.

Ten-Hour Law for Women

There has recently been a great deal of discussion in Illinois concerning the constitutionality of the Ten Hour Law for Women, and the importance of having it apply to mercantile pursuits as well as to factories and to workshops.

Long Hours Recognized as Responsible for Physical and Moral Break- Down

It is evident that the long day of twelve or more hours cripples the human system, dwarfs the mind, gives no time for culture and recreation and shortens life. The excessive fatigue induced by overwork, coupled with the minimum of time every day for leisure and recreation, often makes it difficult for girls to withstand the temptations which press hard upon them, and which lead to a moral as well as a physical breakdown. This is doubly true in the department stores where girls work surrounded by, and selling, the luxuries which they all crave for a wage compensation inadequate for a life of decency and respectability.

Peculiar Temptations in Department Stores

There are 15,000 women employed in the downtown department stores of Chicago and approximately 10,000 more in the outlying neighborhood department stores. The Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago was desirous of getting at the working and living conditions of such girls, and in February, 1910, employed a woman investi-

Study Began in February, 1910

gator who was to make the acquaintance of, and, if possible, get at the stories of 200 department store girls, provided these stories could be learned without the girls knowing that they were

being interviewed. As far as possible a general outline was followed in each interview, including questions about hours of work, wages, physical and mental strain, home conditions, living with the family or boarding and opportunities for study and recreation.

**Two Hundred
Girls Inter-
viewed**

The 200 girls interviewed worked in 30 department stores, 12 in the downtown district, 18 in other parts of the city; they were almost all American born, the average age being 19 years; 82 of these girls willingly gave their names and addresses. They were almost without exception nice girls, good-looking and well dressed, for the rules of the department stores are strict in this respect and require that their girls shall be "clean and neat in appearance and avoid extravagance or display." Every woman knows that simplicity is costly and if a girl must appear each morning neat and well dressed, she must spend her Sundays at least, and very often her evenings, in going carefully over her wardrobe and in cleaning, pressing, washing and mending her clothes instead of being able to devote her leisure time to cultivation or recreation.

**Majority of
These Girls Live
With Their
Families**

Perhaps one of the most interesting things developed by the investigation was that 173 of the girls lived at home, and of these 126 paid their entire wages every week into the family exchequer; of those remaining 36 paid from \$2.50 to \$6.00 per week for their home board and only 11 had the entire use of their own money.

**20 Per Cent
Receive \$5.50
or Less**

The salaries of the girls varied from \$2.50 to \$11.00 a week; 7 of the girls received \$3.50 per week and less; 33 received \$4.00 to \$5.50; 54 received \$6.00; 68 received \$6.50 to \$8.00; 19 received from \$8.50 to \$10.00 and one received \$11.00; the balance were paid on a commission basis.

A Girl Cannot Live Away from Home on Less Than \$8.00 per Week

It has been estimated that if a girl does not live at home she cannot live on less than \$8.00 per week, for she has to pay \$1.50 to \$2.00 per week for her room, \$3.00 for her board, 60 cents for her carfare and 90 cents for luncheons; this only leaves her \$1.50 or \$2.00 for clothes, doctors, dentists, literature and recreation.

Only the Poorest Accommodations Afforded Those Who Live Away from Home

The girl who lives at home and who gives her wages to her mother is, of course, protected in that she is clothed, sheltered and fed, but the girl who is not living at home is obliged to rent the cheapest room she can find from a landlady who is utilizing every possible inch of space for lodgers; the girl is able to afford only a small hall bedroom, poorly lighted, inadequately ventilated and poorly furnished, and it is only a short time before impure air and improperly cooked food produce an anæmic condition which offers a fertile field for all disease.

No Pay for Time Off the Usual Rule

A few of the large department stores have a Sick Benefit Association, which docks twenty-five to thirty-five cents per month from the clerks' wages for sick benefits, which entitles them to half-pay if ill for a short time. No one is eligible for this Association unless they have been in the employ of the store for one year. Almost all of the stores dock the full pay when the girls are off.

Length of Working Day Frequently 10½ to 11½ Hours

The majority of the stores require their girls to be on duty at 8:00 a. m.; this means that the girl must rise at 6:30; the average time for luncheon is ¾ of an hour; the usual time for leaving in the larger stores is 6:00, sometimes 6:30 p. m. From the down-

town stores the average length of time required to reach home and get supper is one to one and a half hours; the girl clerk works from 9 to 10 hours a day, but the ride in the trolley often makes a day of ten and a half to eleven and a half hours.

**Quality and
Quantity of
Food Usually
Insufficient**

The long hours and constant standing of the department store girl make nourishing food a necessity, but this she cannot always procure. The majority of these girls spend from ten to fifteen cents a day for luncheon, which usually consists of coffee and doughnuts or coffee and pie or something of this kind. One investigator, for a period of a month, attempted to eat the same luncheon which she saw being taken by the department store girls, but at the end of that time she was obliged to discontinue, as her digestion was upset and she felt the need of more nourishing food; yet we cannot wonder that out of her modest income the department store girl cannot afford to spend more than ten or fifteen cents for her noonday meal.

**A Girl Who
Tried to Live
on \$2.50 per
Week**

One young girl who did not speak English very well was engaged as a bundle wrapper in a department store at \$2.50 per week; she was obliged to support herself and when found by the Protective Association was paying \$1.50 for her hall bedroom, walking to and from her work to save carfare in shoes literally without soles and endeavoring to satisfy her hunger on the remaining dollar, and with the food given away at the demonstration counters of the neighboring department stores.

**Temptations of
Shop Girl
Greater Than
Those of Fac-
tory Girl**

The department store girl is much more subject to temptation than is the girl who works in the factory, for the latter is more protected during her working hours as she comes in contact only

with her fellow-workers, while the department store girl meets a large number of other people and is constantly surrounded by the articles which are so dear to the feminine heart. She sees passing and repassing all day women who are gorgeously arrayed in the very kind of clothes which she naturally covets and she encounters three dangers.

Difficult to Protect Girls from Advances of Procurers

First, she may be accosted and tempted by the well-dressed, good-looking woman keeper of a disreputable house, who will engage her in conversation and probably invite her to her house. As illustrating this first danger, a young girl working in the cloak department of one of our large department stores waited upon a well-dressed woman who was apparently accompanied by her daughter. She purchased a cloak and engaged the young clerk in conversation, telling her that she looked hot and tired and asked her if she would not like to go out to luncheon with her; the girl, seeing no harm, accepted the invitation. A few days later the two women appeared again and, saying that they had taken a fancy to the young girl, invited her to spend Sunday with them at their apartment on the North Side; they promised to return for her when the store closed and take her to their home; needless to say, the so-called "home" was a disreputable house.

Girl Has Little Chance to Protect Herself

Second, the girl is often at the mercy of the cadet, who is the recruiting officer for a disreputable house; he may purchase articles from her and make insulting remarks, while at the same time he makes up his mind as to whether or not he will be able to persuade her to enter into an immoral life. It frequently happens that if a girl refuses to have any conversation with the man outside of business communications, he reports her as impertinent to the manager or floor walker, and many of the girls say that in a

number of the stores, as the result of such a charge, they are at once dismissed without a chance to even give the other side of the story.

**A Girl Starving
for Pleasure
Is an Easy Prey**

As an illustration of this second danger, a young girl selling at the ribbon counter in one of the department stores was accosted by a young man who purchased several yards of ribbon and then invited her out to lunch with him, telling her that if she had a friend he would bring his chum and they would have a family party. The girl, starved for pleasure and anxious for some excitement to relieve the monotony of her day, invited a girl friend and they both accepted the invitation. The girls lunched with the young men several times a week for three months, and then they were also invited out to dinner; finally, one night the two couples became separated and the girls, who had been given some drugged wine, found themselves later on ruined, bewildered and deserted.

**Girls Frequently
in Danger from
"Man Higher
Up"**

Third, the girl is at the mercy of "the man higher up" in her department; if he makes advances to her that she does not accept, he can tell her that her services are no longer required. It is a difficult thing for the department store girl, under these circumstances, to be able to keep her position. Some time ago two girls came into the rooms of the Protective Association, the one leading the other by the hand. The elder one said: "I have brought to you my sister; for me, it is too late, but I do not want her to work any longer in the department store where she now is or it will be too late for her." The Juvenile Protective Association, after investigating the reputation of the man at the head of her department, found a place for her elsewhere.

**Conditions in
Outlying
Department
Stores**

The outlying or neighborhood department stores are located all over the city, several miles from the large stores on South State street; many of them are in districts thickly settled by foreigners, where women find it easy to shop in their own neighborhood, thus saving carfare, and where they can negotiate their purchases in their own language. These stores supply every want for the families in the neighborhood, from stoves and furniture to clothing and musical instruments; girls who live in the neighborhood become the saleswomen and are usually required to know one other language besides English. Many of the women do their shopping in the evening, leaving their husbands to look after the children, and in these stores the girls work from 8:00 a. m. to 9:00 p. m. three nights in the week, from 8:00 a. m. to 10:00 p. m. or 11:00 p. m. on Saturday and 8:00 a. m. to 6:00 p. m. two days in the week, thus giving them two evenings off; they also often work all or part of Sunday. It was found, however, that almost without exception girls preferred to work in these outlying stores, because they could live in the neighborhood and avoid the long street car rides, and they agreed that to be packed in a street car from half an hour to an hour every morning and night, seldom finding a seat, and if one were found, having people hanging over them and leaning against them, was much more tiring than the work of the entire day.

**Possibility of
Luncheon and
Supper at
Home**

Another reason given for preferring the smaller stores was that it was possible to get home for luncheon and supper; also that in the small department stores the customer would almost invariably explain why she was making the purchase and this information, with other friendly conversation, would add interest and excite-

ment to the sale which was always lacking in the downtown stores.

**Long Hours of
Outlying Stores
Not a Business
Necessity**

The need of keeping these stores open in the evening is due more to competition than to the real needs of the customers. In several districts where the stores had all agreed to close on a Sunday or on a certain night in the week, the managers stated that there had been no loss of trade, for the neighborhood had learned to adapt itself to the change.

**Always Tired!
Tired Backs,
Tired Hands,
Tired Feet**

With these long hours of work is it any wonder that 173 of the girls complained that they were always tired! Many of them stated that their backs ached from the constant standing, as they were not encouraged to sit down even when seats were provided; that they were often obliged to slip off their shoes and that it was almost impossible to get them on again at night because of their swollen feet; that many of them had to sit with their feet in hot water after they reached home and that they were almost always too tired to read, too tired to eat and sometimes even too tired to sleep!

**Ten Years in a
Department
Store. Worn
Out at 22**

A young girl of twenty-two had worked for ten years in a large department store; first, as cash girl, and later as clerk. She gave up her position because she could stand it no longer; she earned \$7.00 a week, on which she helped support her mother and two younger children; she said that none of her money went for shows, dances, ice cream, or anything frivolous; she knew the value of a dollar because she worked hard enough to earn it; she never read, as she was always "too tired"—so tired that when she

went home at night she felt as though she must scream. She always hoped to marry and have a home of her own, but she felt that she couldn't stand the work much longer; she must have some amusement; she never had even her Sundays, as she had to spend the entire day cleaning up her wardrobe; her greatest pleasure was to go to an occasional dance, although she could not afford to go unless invited.

**From Country
Town to City
Basement**

The following is a typical story of a girl who lived with her family in Wisconsin. The mother and father dying, the girl was obliged to leave high school and to go to work; there was nothing to be found in the little country town where she lived and she came to Chicago and secured work at \$5.50 per week in the Tinware Department in the basement of a large department store on South State street; coming from the outdoor life of the country, she found it very difficult to work where the air was bad and where there was nothing but electric light. "The easiest thing I do," she said, "is to wait on the trade, but, my! it is hard to haul and lift the tinware, move the pots and kettles, take them down from shelves and put them back again, move them from one stand to the other and get ready for sales days; they make the girls do all this lifting and it is really terrible how we do have to work down in this basement. I have been here in Chicago a year and have only met one family of nice people. I do not have time to make acquaintances. I love to read, but I have no chance to get library books; all I see is an occasional paper. I get home so late that I am too tired to go out at night and, besides, I have to wash and mend my clothes. I wish people would just come and live in this basement and they would see that life down here is not very pleasant."

**Thirteen Hours
a Day for Two
Weeks in
December that
Patrons May
Properly Cele-
brate the Birth
of Christ**

supper money in the larger stores. All of the stores make large profits at the holiday season, but they are made at the expense of thousands of employes, whose weary feet and aching backs are the result of the mad rush to shop on the part of thousands of Christian people who are thus seeking to express the kindness and goodwill which our Christmas commemorates!

**The Irony of
"Merry
Christmas"**

those who could not find seats sat down on the floor and to the remonstrances of the conductor replied that they were "too dead to stand another minute."

**At Least Two
Days in Bed
Necessary to
Recover from the
"Celebration"**

One Christmas Eve, at eleven o'clock at night the car was full of young shop-girls who had been on their feet all day; The women clerks in the department stores are always glad when they find that Christmas comes on a Saturday or Monday so that they will have a chance to "stay in bed for two days and rest up."

**Vacations with
Pay Exception,
Not the Rule**

Some of the larger stores allow their employes who have been with them more than a year a vacation with pay for one or two weeks, but the majority allow no pay whatever for time off. Of the 200 girls seen, 94 stated that they had no such thing in their lives as recreation, no dances, no concerts, not even a five-cent theatre! 58 of them acknowledged that they sometimes went to dances, although many of them said that they were really too tired to enjoy dancing, and we un-

fortunately know that the girl who goes to the unchaperoned public dance hall in a state of exhaustion is in a dangerous position, for she craves the stimulants which are always offered to her and which frequently lead to further excesses; 48 of the girls stated that they attended 5 and 10 cent theatres, but not one girl was found who patronized those which were higher priced, and the majority stated that they could not afford to go at all unless they were invited.

"No Time to Read" the Usual Story Only two of the girls were found who took books from the public library; one only bought magazines; 36 bought a penny newspaper; 43 did some miscellaneous reading, usually novels borrowed from friends, while 118 claimed that they never had time to read anything, even a newspaper! One girl said that her greatest pleasure was to buy an occasional apple to eat while reading a book, and to try and make the apple last as long as possible.

"Wish I Was Dead" A young girl of twenty-four, three years in a large department store, earned \$6.00 a week. She "doesn't mind the work so much, although selling notions is very trying because people are so fussy." She said her feet were giving out, however, and it was all she could do to get home at night; she found that the draughts from the doors blowing constantly on her gave her repeated colds, and the dust caused by so many people passing hurt her throat; she was tired and "wished she was dead."

Appeal for Half Day Off All through the interviews with the 200 girls the investigator heard the wistful expression: "If we only had some time during the week when we could get a little rest; when we could get caught up; when we could have a little recreation." Everywhere the need was felt for a half-day off. Four of the better department stores close Saturday afternoon regularly during

July and August, and it is to be regretted that the other large stores are not willing to curtail their profits in order to give their employes a half holiday each week. If the shopping public would remember that the weary girls need rest, and on Saturday afternoon would keep away from the big stores, then there would be no incentive to keep open.

Vice Commission Says that Economic Conditions Make for Prostitution

When we remember that all work and no play is injurious to health as well as to morals, and that even the work done is not rewarded by a living wage, we cannot wonder that the recent report of the Vice Commission of Chicago which emphasizes that economic conditions make for prostitution, also states that the investigation of 119 women who had gone wrong, and who were found leading immoral lives in houses, dance halls and on the streets, shows that 18 women came from department stores and that 38 stated that they had entered the career because of their need for money. Some had entered it for the barest necessities of life as in the following instance:

Close to the Border

A young widow with a small child, finding it impossible to obtain a situation, finally took a position in a downtown lunchroom in a department store and received \$3.50 a week; out of this she paid \$2.00 a week for a furnished room, in which she lived with her four-year-old boy. She locked him in during the day and fed him out of the remaining \$1.50 left over from her wages. She herself lunched on what was left on the plates in the department store; her supper consisted of rolls which she managed to take home in her pocket. She was pretty and attractive and began to receive invitations to dine out with men. These she accepted because she was "so hungry" that she felt that she must have a good meal now and then. She finally dined with a man who saw the temptations before her and went to the United Charities, saying

that the woman needed a friend and that unless something was done for her she would be forced into an immoral life.

"The Easiest Way"

Thousands of shopgirls live on six dollars a week in Chicago. The majority do it honestly, but they do not have nourishing food, adequate shelter, warm clothing or any recreation. According to a census taken by the Woman's Trade Union League of Chicago 25 to 30 per cent of the women employed in the department stores of Chicago are not receiving a living wage; they may earn an existence, but not enough to secure fullness of life, and when a girl wearies of it she quickly learns of the possibilities of a career which seems to offer luxurious living with abundance of recreation. Is it any wonder that she sometimes chooses "the easiest way?"

