BUSINESS man on his way down town one morning noticed opposite him, in the street car, a neat, tidy young working girl. Her shoes were polished, her collar straight, her skirt showed no symptoms of parting company with her fresh white waist, her hair was smooth and well arranged. "I’ll bet you dollars to doughnuts," said the business man to his companion, "that she works in a place where there is a social secretary."

“What do you mean? What in the world is a social secretary?” asked his friend. “It’s really a new profession for both men and women. Social secretaries are employed in large establishments to look after the health and general well being of worker and plant, to be the point of contact between the firm and its force in all questions which arise concerning life in the factory, workshop, or store. They adjust grievances and forestall unnecessary difficulties, and it is said to be a good thing all round.” And it is, for the firms which have them strongly endorse this profession, one of the newest to be evolved from our kaleidoscopic industrial conditions.

The idea was conceived by an industrialist in Holland who felt the need of such a person in his factory and who had sufficient originality to make the experiment. The American Institute of Social Service immediately saw the good which would accompany the adoption of this profession in the United States and therefore spread abroad the principle, with the prompt result of an American pioneer social secretary, a woman, who filled this position in a Rhode Island department store. Her four years’ work greatly improved conditions for the workers. Her employer considered her services worth every cent of the very good salary which he paid her.

There are to-day twenty-seven social secretaries in the United States, about an even number of men and women.

The social secretary usually begins on a salary of $720 a year, which is increased according to capability for the work. Salaries range from this sum to $2,500 a year. The position is, however, no sinecure. It means responsibility, many annoyances, and is difficult
THE SOCIAL SECRETARY

to fill acceptably. The cardinal principles of the social secretary’s
gospel are sanitation, recreation and equalization. The chief requisites
for the work are tact, common sense coupled with a knowledge of life
gained through experience, a keen sense of justice, fearlessness of
adverse criticism and ability to steer so straight a course between
sympathy and fear as to win absolute confidence from those in com-
mand as well as from the rank and file.

It is essential to have a discriminating sense of the justice which
belongs to each side; to know where the rights and privileges of
employer and employee diverge, and to be quick to see, and capable
of making the employer see, the advantage in dollars and cents which
results from improved conditions, and to be able to make equally clear
to the employee the difficulties which beset the management of every
large enterprise.

THE organization and consolidation of vast industries, our
factory system and immense department stores make it no
longer possible for the employer to know his working force
except as an impersonal human hive. The employees rarely, if ever,
see him. Thus abuses and discomforts arise, through nobody’s fault
but simply because it is nobody’s business to correct them. This leads
to friction which might easily be avoided by the right word spoken at
the proper time.

It is the duty of the social secretary not only to watch over the
health, comfort and happiness of the force during working hours,
but also to obtain sufficient knowledge of their private life to be a real
help in time of trouble. There are times when wise advice and a little
financial aid, as a loan in some form, will tide a girl over a crisis which
otherwise might prove a temptation to irreparable disaster.

Sometimes a little incident will throw a flood of light upon a
working girl’s home life and the strict economies she must practise.
Not long ago the social secretary of a department store noticed that
one of the shop girls had a big piece of white paper pinned over the
front of her waist. When asked the reason for it she replied that she
had an engagement for that evening, wished to keep her waist clean,
and would not have time to wash it after work was over. “And have
you only one waist?”
"Yes," was the reply, "and I wash it out at night to have it fresh next day."

"I should think your mother would do that for you; you must be tired when you get home."

"Mother has too much to do already with looking after the children. There are seven of us and I'm the oldest."

It is, perhaps, needless to say that to-day the girl has more than one waist.

The secretary establishes luncheon rooms, rest rooms, mutual aid associations, thrift funds and penny provident banks; if asked to do so, she is ready to give suggestions about the proper way to dress, the most becoming colors for a girl to wear, whether or not to listen to the wiles of Dan Cupid, and all sorts of other personal matters which perplex the ordinary mortal—in short, the social secretary is to be the employees' guide, philosopher and friend.

Besides the usual betterment features the secretary also arranges many forms of social amusement, such as dances, lectures and musicales. If this functionary did nothing more than teach working people how to enjoy themselves in a sane, healthy way the work would be justified. The American people, as a nation, do not know how to play properly. We take our pleasure so vehemently that it amounts to work or is perverted into dissipation. Few realize the sanity of a little brightness day by day, or the insanity of bolting our pleasures at a single gulp, or waiting to enjoy them until we are too old to do so.

One of New York's largest department stores maintains an attractive vacation home at Long Branch. The social secretary sends the girls there in congenial parties for a week's holiday in summer. This place is a real life-saving station. Many a girl goes to the vacation house utterly weary of paved streets and the city's dust and din. It is joy unspeakable to walk on the real ground, to feel the foot sink into the soft green grass. After a week of invigorating air, rest and abundant, wholesome food, a shop girl will return to work re-created, in very truth made over.

THE social secretary of a Pittsburg factory is a physician. His chief concern is naturally the health of the men and women who work there, and perhaps this is the reason for a most unusual feature of industrial betterment not found elsewhere, namely,
THE SOCIAL SECRETARY

a carriage for the use of convalescent employees, in order that they may have a breath of fresh air in the park. Only those who have been shut up during an illness know how much pleasure this carriage gives.

The three thousand employees of an Ohio factory keep the social secretary busy enough to need the help of two assistants. The personnel of this establishment is far above the average, the employees have quite a social position of their own. Their factory clubs have entertained distinguished persons both of this country and from foreign lands; lectures have been given by well known speakers, and the social work has been done upon such a large scale that the factory stands to-day as an object lesson for the world. There are a great variety of clubs whose meetings are conducted in a manner worthy of their members and of the secretaries who plan them. Great attention is paid to recreation, and dances are frequent—in doors in winter and out in the open air in summer.

If, added to what may be called the domestic side of this profession, the social secretary is empowered to raise or decrease salaries according to the worth of each employee, the whole question of industrial betterment in that house is placed upon a sound economic basis. The importance of improved surroundings can scarcely be overestimated, but at the same time nothing can replace the economic value of adequate pay for efficient service. Wherever a different policy is pursued there is apt to be unrest no matter how pleasant working conditions may be. An adjustable wage system is the surest way to remove dissatisfaction as well as to command capable working people.

There is one establishment in Boston which includes the regulation of the wage system in the duties of its social secretary, who, in this case, is a woman. Besides having a care for the welfare, she keeps a record of each girl’s status with the firm, her regular weekly wages, her average weekly commissions on sales, number of times absent or tardy and general remarks. When this record shows that a girl is worth more to the business than she is receiving the secretary has the power to immediately raise her wages. In the same manner does she reduce the pay of an inefficient employee. This method is the greatest incentive to good work, since it insures to those who do their duty the full reward for it.

This is an exceptionally successful house, and when asked to what single thing in its policy the manager attributed its rapid growth,
THE SOCIAL SECRETARY

without hesitation the reply was, “The right of every one to speak his or her mind about all matters connected with the business.” “Why is that such a great thing?” “Because it develops character,” was the reply. “You mean loyalty?” “No, I mean character—which is more, and includes loyalty. Slavish, doglike fidelity is good enough in its way, but constructive criticism is far more valuable.”

Comfortable luncheon rooms, individual lockers for coats and hats and conveniences of a similar nature are taken as a matter of course in this house. The secretary chiefly concerns herself with the question of wages, although she says, “Wherever I see neglect in the way of ventilation or an opportunity to save a girl from a nervous breakdown by a little needed rest, of course I speak about it.”

The social secretary of a Western mining company is a man. There are fifteen thousand miners, comprising twenty-six nationalities and speaking thirty-five languages and dialects, in his care. The mining camps are scattered through more than one state and the man at the helm of the social work has entire supervision of the elaborate system of medical attendance, housing and schools which the company maintains for the men and their families. A master hand is needed to mould these varying elements into one homogeneous class. The Americanization of this great number of immigrants is a striking instance of the manner in which industrial betterment reacts upon the community and the national life at large.

Occupied with broad interests, engaged in promoting the best features of business life, having unusual opportunities for seeing human nature at its best and at its worst, the man or woman who would be a social secretary must necessarily be a student of humanity imbued with a purpose higher than the mere earning of a salary, for it is no light thing to have the happiness and prosperity of others in one’s keeping. The social secretary must be a master craftsman capable of making the most out of unpromising material, and the possessor of those qualities of soul, mind and behavior that are an ever present influence, a stimulant in time of discouragement. The social secretary must have understanding and sympathy to be an adviser in time of doubt, a teacher of the ignorant, a friend of the intelligent and a good comrade always.