CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION OF THE MILLINERY TRADE AND OF ITS PROCESSES

SECTION I

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRADE

A parasitic trade, as defined by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb, is one in which the employers "are able to obtain the use of labor not included in their wage-bill."\(^1\) Two classes of parasitic trades are distinguished—one in which the workers are partially maintained from the incomes of persons unconnected with the industry, and the other in which the employers are enabled to take such advantage of their workers as to pay wages insufficient to maintain them in average health, or to force them to work for very long hours or under dangerous and unsanitary conditions.

The first form of parasitism is less vicious than the second and is characteristic of much labor done by women and children. It is illustrated by the labor of those women who are not paid sufficient wages to maintain them in efficiency unless these wages are supplemented by aid from their families or from other sources. "The employer of partially subsidized woman or child labor gains, . . . actually a double advantage over the self-supporting trades; he gets without cost to himself the extra energy due to the extra food, and he abstracts—possibly from the workers at a rival process, or in a competing industry—some of the income which might have increased the energy put into the other trade."\(^2\) The second and more vicious form of


parasitism—the sweated trades—are, to be sure, "not drawing any money subsidy from the incomes of other classes. But in thus deteriorating the physique, intelligence, and character of their operatives, they are drawing on the capital stock of the nation.... It is taking from these workers, week by week, more than its wages can restore to them."1 This form of parasitism is a matter of vital social concern, since it makes for physical degeneration.

The partially subsidized form of parasitic trades is no less a matter of social concern, and carries with it, perhaps, more insidious effects than do the sweated trades. The physical deterioration of the worker in the sweated trade shouts its warning. But the habit of parasitism which is fostered in the workers of a subsidized trade carries with it a weakening of the will and of the moral fiber, the effects of which cannot be estimated or guarded against. It tends to reduce individual responsibility and to destroy all feeling of community interests and activity. By removing the emphasis from efficiency, it intensifies one of the fundamental weaknesses of the position of women in industry, lack of adequate training. It is rendered more insidious because it is often defended on the ground of preserving family unity. Considerable apprehension would be aroused if the worker were to receive aid from society in the form of charity or from illicit sources to supplement wages that are insufficient to maintain efficiency.

Millinery is a trade employing partially subsidized woman's labor. The almost universal requirement of employers that their workers live at home, or have means of support other than their trade, gives evidence of this phase of parasitism. The answers of employers to the question, "Would you advise a girl to enter the trade?" showed a conscious recognition of this characteristic. About 75 per cent. of the employers visited in both Boston and Philadelphia would not advise a girl to enter the trade unless she had a home or some other means of support, or possessed exceptional talent—and even then, she would need some additional form of income while learning. Eighteen employers in Boston and twelve in Philadelphia most emphatically

1 Ibid., p. 751.
refused to advise a girl to take up millinery under any circumstances.\(^1\)

Most of the millinery workers do live at home. Data on this point were obtained from three sources, the employers, the workers and the United States census. Eighty-six per cent. (89) of the total number of Boston firms and 82 per cent. (86) of the total number of Philadelphia firms reported that the majority of their workers lived at home. Many of these incidentally supplemented their answers by such significant remarks as, "A girl needs the help of her family," "Make it a point to get girls from good homes, so they can live on their wages," "Wouldn't take a girl who doesn't—a girl can't live on $6 a week," "Don't want a girl who hasn't a good home—it worries me to turn her off in the dull season." In Boston 83 per cent. (105) of the 126 workers reporting on this question lived with their families or other relatives, while only 17 per cent. (21) of the number reporting could in any sense of the word be said to be self-supporting. In Philadelphia 84 per cent. (100) of the 119 reporting lived with their families or with relatives. That this characteristic of millinery workers is not local is shown by United States census statistics. "The proportion of milliners who were apparently the sole support of the families in which they were living was small, being 7.1 per cent, or about 1 in 14. The proportion who were boarding and were therefore apparently dependent upon their own earnings was twice as great, while the number living in families with other bread-winners formed 78.7 per cent of the total."\(^2\)

Certain characteristics of women at work and the conditions of the trade itself are the causes of the parasitic nature of the trade. For this there are three chief reasons:—(1) the seasons; (2) the two distinct processes of the trade, only one of which employs highly paid workers and that a small group; and (3) the over-supply of workers.

The seasonal character of the trade constitutes the most potent cause for the millinery worker's need of a subsidy. There are

\(^1\) Ninety-six of the 103 Boston firms visited, and 102 of the 104 Philadelphia firms answered this question.

two busy seasons, the fall season, beginning usually in September and ending in November or December, and the spring season, opening a few weeks before Easter and closing in June, altogether varying in length from 6 to 8 months, and occasionally 10 months. Work is rather leisurely at the beginning of each busy season. The girls returning from their enforced vacation are eager to be employed, and are engaged in making "stock" hats for the spring or fall "opening." Gradually as trade opens the girls are made to work more swiftly upon both "stock" and "order" hats. Orders which "must be finished by Saturday night at the latest" begin to pile up towards the end of each week and the whole force is working under a nerve-racking pressure. This rush continues for several weeks without cessation until perhaps after a particularly busy Saturday, the employer enters the workroom to inform her force that she has no orders for the next week and must dismiss some of her employees. This sudden rush and uncertainty intensifies the seriousness of the seasonal question.

The seasonal difficulty is accentuated by the fact that millinery is a fashion trade in which demand occurs at stated periods and value is in direct proportion to "style." Boston and Philadelphia depend almost wholly upon Paris and New York for prevailing styles. The exclusive and larger shops each season send representatives abroad to study the new fashions and to obtain the latest materials. A few models from London, Paris and other European fashion centers are imported at considerable expense and copied in the millinery workrooms with variations as to size, color and materials. The proprietors of the smaller establishments or the better trimmers of the larger shops as a rule, obtain their ideas from New York. New York, in turn, imports models from Europe which are copied in the workrooms of its wholesale millinery establishments and sent all over the United States as models to be adapted to individual customers.

Not only fashion but caprice and uncertainty are characteristics of this trade and affect both employer and employee. The milliner must try out different designs to discover the popular ones. Parisian milliners, or some other fashion leaders, must
take the initiative and even then can have no assurance that their styles will be acceptable. Each individual employee in a fashion trade, with its ever-changing styles, finds that "there is always something new to learn in Millinery." The worker finds that every new style ushers in some new trick to learn, and that in order to maintain proficiency she must practice it constantly. The shops catering to a fashionable clientèle feel the effects most keenly. The increasing use of automobiles, compelling the wearing of close-fitting bonnets, has lessened the demand for elaborate carriage hats and has sounded the note of simplicity in millinery. The custom in Philadelphia, and the law in Boston compelling women to remove their hats during the performance at the opera, has decreased the demand for evening hats. Even the growing custom of going to the country early in the spring and returning late in the fall has noticeably shortened the season and decreased the number of workers required. One employer, as an illustration, stated that she had reduced her force by three or four makers, because the prevailing simplicity and the popularity of pressed shapes, felts and machine-made hats necessitated fewer workers. Thus the vagaries of fashion and customs affect appreciably the number of workers employed in the workroom and the length of the seasons.

The presence of a small proportion of highly paid workers who perform one important process throws a glamor around the whole trade and contribute toward making millinery parasitic. Professor Marshall says, "If an occupation offers a few extremely high prizes, its attractiveness is increased out of all proportion to their aggregate value. For this there are two reasons. The first is that young men of an adventurous disposition are more attracted by the prospects of a great success than they are deterred by the fear of failure; and the second is that the social rank of an occupation depends more on the highest dignity and the best position which can be attained through it than on the average good fortune of those engaged in it." 1 Thus many workers are attracted into millinery by the hope of attaining the high wages or the higher social prestige of the small per-

centage of designers and trimmers. While excellent opportuni-
ties await the exceptional worker with artistic ability, for the
large number of girls who enter the trade, opportunities are few
and many of these poorly paid.

The large supply of workers lowers the wages paid in the di-
vision requiring technical skill only and constitutes a third reason
for the worker’s need of a subsidy. The majority of employers
agree that there is no difficulty in obtaining workers. They do,
however, usually qualify this statement by saying that the supply
of good workers is insufficient, and the employees as a rule con-
firm this opinion. It is not uncommon to hear an employee re-
mark, "Millinery is becoming a poor business—there are too
many girls going into it. A good worker, though, has no diffi-
culty in getting work." One worker, who had been employed
in some of the best shops in Boston at a good wage, said, "I
can stay here (her present position) till I die. Madam says
she has so much trouble getting good makers that she won’t let
me go if she can help it." This surplus of incompetent workers
is due primarily to two causes, (1) the social prestige of the
trade, which attracts many girls who are neither by nature nor
ability fitted for it; (2) the unwillingness of many workers to
devote sufficient time to acquire requisite skill and experience.
Unlike a man, who expects to maintain a family by means of his
trade, a woman usually looks forward to being self-supporting
only for the short period until marriage. She sees no neces-
sity for spending much time in acquiring knowledge and pro-
cficiency in a trade which at best is only a temporary occu-
pation. Ordinarily, to learn millinery an apprentice should spend
two seasons, spring and fall, that she may gain experience in
handling seasonal kinds of materials. But very often a worker,
after giving her time for one season, will represent herself as an
experienced maker in some other shop. The capable maker
may, and probably does, succeed. It is the large group of less
capable ones that swells the ranks of inefficient workers.

The social prestige universally accorded to them by workers
in other trades is a second equally important reason for the
over-supply of workers in millinery. A Russian Jewish girl in
a dark, dirty wholesale workroom in Philadelphia said, "Oh,
it gives one so much better social position than factory work!”
“I haven’t such a nice job as Ethel’s,” said a millinery worker’s
sixteen-year-old sister, who was employed in a box-factory, “but
I can make as much as she does in a week and usually lots more.
Last week I earned $16!” A common reason given by the work-
ners for taking up millinery is that they thought it was a “re-
finned” trade, and that they “would meet a better class of peo-
ple.” This social prestige proves an inducement to two types
of girls—the one who wishes to raise herself in the social scale,
and the one who wishes to earn pin money and at the same time
not to lose social caste. They are willing to accept such social
position as the trade gives them in part payment for services.
The family or society pays the amount deducted from the wages
—the cost of this social position—and thus helps to pay the
wages-bill of the millinery trade.

SECTION II

DESCRIPTION OF PROCESSES

A general ignorance prevails as to the meaning of millinery
terms. “I never tell people I’m a maker,” said one worker.
“I just say I’m a milliner, I haven’t time to explain to them
what a maker is.” An adequate idea of the processes of a trade,
however, is necessary to a clear understanding of the trade itself.
No such confusion of terms exists in Boston and in Philadelphia
as seems to prevail in New York, where such expressions as “im-
prover,” “preparer” and “milliner” with a corresponding lack
of universal definition tend to befog the idea of the processes.
While the names applied to the workers in the various processes
are not identical in Boston and in Philadelphia, yet no uncer-
tainty as to the meaning of the terms employed exists. The
processes are the same throughout custom millinery no matter
under what title the workers who perform them may be known.
The work in millinery falls into two distinct divisions, (1)
the making and (2) the designing and trimming of the hat, the
one requiring skill and dexterity, the other creative and ar-
tistic ability; the one partaking of the nature of a trade, the other rising practically into the ranks of a profession or an art. Five different positions are distinguished according to the skill and artistic cleverness required, the apprentice, the maker, the copyist, the trimmer, and the designer. The apprentice and the maker form the "making" division, the trimmer and designer, the higher division of designing and trimming, and the copyist performs some of the functions of both divisions. To differentiate exactly between these various positions is impossible. Perhaps in making, one girl may construct frames more accurately and firmly than another, and she will be given such work to do. A second girl may stretch velvet over frames more smoothly, leaving less of a "handled" appearance. A third may specialize on bonnets and toques, which require neat, careful workmanship, or another on trimmings for the trimmer. Even the trimmers may specialize on children's hats, evening hats, bonnets, or toques. The work varies with the establishment. In one, no frames are made by hand and all the bands are purchased by the gross, ready-made; in another, no hat is sent out without the touch of individuality characteristic of a handmade frame. Work is apportioned according to the special ability of the employee, but in general the following millinery processes prevail.

Millinery is ordinarily learned through a system of apprenticeship by which the beginner gives her time for two seasons to learn both summer and winter work. Only the making processes can be taught. "You can't teach trimming," is the sentiment of workers and employers alike. The apprentice usually begins making bands, which is not very attractive work for an ambitious girl and soon becomes monotonous, but affords opportunity for learning fundamental millinery stitches and for acquiring the knack of handling wire and buckram—two rather difficult materials with which to work. Then she is taught to line a hat, to wire bows, to hem silks and velvets, to make folds and facings, to shirr materials and to sew on braids, all of which must be done so that the stitches do not show. Finally, she learns to

1 The term "milliner" as used in Philadelphia exactly corresponds to the term "maker" in Boston. The latter, since it is derived from the name of the process, is used throughout this study instead of "milliner."
make frames, if she is in a workroom where frames are made by hand, and to cover them with various materials. Ability to sew firmly and to tack is a prime requisite in millinery. Handling millinery materials so as to obtain an artistic appearance requires practice, and, while it is not surprising that an apprentice often complains that she did nothing but make bands or folds, she thus shows that she fails to realize that these afford practice in the a b c’s of her trade which should be learned with as little expense as possible to her employer. Much of the work is difficult and hard to “pick up,” so that the making processes as a rule must be learned.

After the apprentice has served her time she is advanced to the position of maker. Employees from one or two of the best shops in Boston used the term “improver” to designate a worker who has completed her apprenticeship, in other words, an inexperienced maker. This word is commonly used in Philadelphia in the same sense in which it is occasionally used in Boston. It does not apply to a separate process, but rather to the stage of experience, or inexperience of the worker. Thus whenever an employer who used the term was asked to define it, she invariably said, “Oh, an improver’s the same as a maker.” The same meaning is given to the word abroad, as a general term applied to workers just advanced beyond the apprenticeship stage.1 The word “preparer” was used in a few instances in both cities to designate an advanced maker sitting beside the trimmer, and performing the more difficult and expert work of making.2

The maker constructs from measurements the wire or buckram frames and covers them with silk, velvet, chiffon, or straw. She has some rather difficult problems to solve. Her trimmer may sketch a hat and tell her to make one like it with no other guide than the sketch, and perhaps a measurement or two. A high


2 As an illustration of the lack of confusion of terms in Boston, no worker was interviewed who claimed to be either an improver or a preparer. The term “milliner” which in New York and in Philadelphia is usually employed to designate one who does the work of a maker, is frequently applied in Boston to a worker who knows thoroughly both the making and trimming processes.
degree of accuracy is thus demanded. If one side of the frame varies an eighth of an inch, the hat will not look like the model.

The copyist ranks between the maker and the trimmer in point of skill and artistic ability and is usually found in all establishments. She does more careful and artistic work than the maker of her establishment, but lacks the initiative and creative ability of the trimmer. She is primarily an imitator. Her work in a high grade custom shop consists in the copying of the frame and trimming of a model hat, either a Paris or a New York hat or one of original design, changing perhaps the color, the size, or the materials used. Fine work and a high degree of accuracy is required in making the frame to resemble the model, and some degree of skill in copying the trimming. In a wholesale millinery establishment, the copyist (usually called a maker) tacks the trimming to the frames which she has covered and which the designer has perhaps designed and had made up by the hundreds at a wire frame factory. The quality of work done by these two copyists is widely different, the standard of the former being fine work and artistic effect, of the latter, number of hats completed.

The trimmers and designers do the more artistic and creative work, and have general supervision over the makers at their tables. That the technique of trimming may be learned from observation and practice, and that the ambitious worker with any creative ability at all may work her way into the artistic division, is probably true of trimming as of other arts. And it is generally conceded that the trimmer who has had practical experience in making and understands it thoroughly is of greater value in supervising her makers than one who has not had such experience. The trimmer trims the hat even if it be such comparatively simple work as tacking on an ornament or a velvet bow or band. She should have a good idea of "placement" and of the combination of colors and materials. She must see that each hat of the shop bears some distinctive and individual touch and that the customer is "fitted." The last touches bestowed by the trimmer upon the hat give individuality and may counterbalance poor workmanship in the making. It has been said, "There is less foundation to millinery and more
finishing and last touches than in any trade; the manipulation of materials is slight and learned quickly compared to other difficult requirements.”

The trimmer usually sits at the head of a table seating from three to eight makers and apprentices, the number varying with her own speed and the character of the work demanded of the assistants. She must plan the work so that the makers are kept busy preparing materials and making hats and trimmings. She is responsible for the character of the work of her assistants and is expected to maintain the standards of excellence of that establishment. Thus the unit of organization in the workroom is the “table,” consisting of trimmer and assistants, and in large establishments there are many such tables.

A designer, proper, is found only in the largest and the most exclusive establishments, and, wherever employed, takes precedence over the trimmer. Often the very best establishments employ no designer, recognized as such, and the trimmers originate designs. In the smaller establishments, the proprietor, if a milliner, or the trimmer performs such work. The chief function of the designer is that of originating and making new designs in hat shapes and ornaments and in ways of trimming. She originates and makes the models of the shop, rarely doing “order work,” while the trimmer, copyist and maker alter the models to suit the individual tastes of the customers.

The difficulty of differentiating accurately between the trimmer and the designer is illustrated by the following experience. One firm reported three designers and three trimmers. Since this was a store professing to copy imported hats, there seemed to be two superfluous designers. Interviews with several workers from this shop brought out the fact that the three trimmers had the privilege of designing, and thus added the title of designer to that of trimmer. This is probably true of other establishments. Their trimmers do some designing, thus accounting for the small number of designers reported by the millinery establishments in Boston and Philadelphia.

The workers in the division requiring technical skill pre-

dominate in the millinery trade as shown by Tables 3 and 4. In Boston 1,429 workers were employed at the height of the busy season in the workrooms of the 97 establishments reporting. Of these 1,429 workers, 84 per cent. (1,197) are engaged in the lower division, 74 per cent. (1,059) being makers, and about ten per cent. (138) apprentices. In Philadelphia 1 the percentage of workers engaged in the division requiring technical skill was practically the same as in Boston. Of the 1,794 workers in 94 firms reporting, 85 per cent. (1,536) are engaged in the technical division, 71 per cent. (1,274)—about 3 per cent. less than in Boston—being makers, and 14 per cent. (262)—about 4 per cent. more than in Boston—being apprentices. Obviously the chance for advancement for the majority of the makers is slight. Often those very qualities—accuracy, neatness and precision—that are so desirable in a good maker preclude her ever attaining to the higher position of trimmer. The statements sometimes heard in the trade, that “a good maker is never a good trimmer,” and that “often the best trimmer can never make” show how keenly the workers themselves realize the line of demarcation between these different grades of work in the same trade. In view of the number of establishments professing to copy imported models, a surprisingly small number of copyists, —only eight in Boston; 2—was returned. The fact that a copyist must be an expert maker no doubt led the majority of establishments to classify them as such. Frequently a worker would call herself a maker, adding, “but really, though, I’m a copyist.”

In both cities, at the height of the busy season about 14 per cent. of the total number of workers were trimmers (198 of the 1,429 workers in Boston and 243 of the 1,794 in Philadelphia). Only 11 designers, so-called, were reported from the 97 establishments in Boston, and 15 from the 94 shops in Philadelphia. The designer usually assumes considerable responsibility, thus

1 One thousand nine hundred and fifty-nine workers were employed at the height of the busy season in 102 Philadelphia establishments; but since there are 165 workers included in that total who were not classified as to trimmers, makers and apprentices, it is less confusing in other connections to subtract the 165 from 1,959 and use the result, 1,794, as a basis throughout.

2 No copyists were returned from Philadelphia, being included among the makers or milliners as they are called in that city.
### TABLE 3, SHOWING THE EXTENT OF EMPLOYMENT IN EACH OCCUPATION DURING THE BUSY SEASON IN 97 BOSTON MILLINERY ESTABLISHMENTS. BASED ON REPORTS OF EMPLOYERS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>9 Wholesale Houses</th>
<th>19 Department Stores</th>
<th>32 Stores</th>
<th>37 Parlors</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Per Cent.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Designers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimmers</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyists</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makers</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>1,059</td>
<td>74.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentices</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>284</strong></td>
<td><strong>532</strong></td>
<td><strong>387</strong></td>
<td><strong>226</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,429</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MILLINERY AS A TRADE FOR WOMEN
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>2 Wholesale Manufacturing Millinery Houses</th>
<th>2 Wholesale Houses</th>
<th>10 Department Stores</th>
<th>63 Millinery Stores</th>
<th>5 Parlor</th>
<th>12 Home Parlors</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Per Cent.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Designers</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimmers</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makers</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1,207</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvers</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentices</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>1,794</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 No classification as to occupation was reported by 8 firms—2 department stores and 6 millinery stores—employing a total of 165 workers.
these eleven designers are reported from the department stores and wholesale houses where large forces are under their direction and supervision. Since much of the success of a millinery establishment depends upon the trimmer and the designer, they are usually given contracts for a definite number of weeks during the season. This privilege is not extended to the maker, who is "turned off" as work slackens and the necessity arises for reducing the force.

The proprietor or a worker usually attends to the customers in the smaller establishments. Special salesgirls, though, are employed in the larger shops. A good millinery salesgirl, in meeting the customer and in understanding her orders correctly, aids materially in the workroom and receives good wages. This study, however, does not include the millinery salesgirl. The interest has been centered upon the girl in the workroom.

The opportunity for advancement in the millinery trade is, after all, not great. The workers in the mechanical division and those in the artistic division show a proportion of six to one in Boston—six makers and apprentices to one trimmer—and of seven to one in Philadelphia. If, as many employers say, a trimmer should keep from five to eight makers and apprentices busy, the proportion of trimmers employed in the establishments of Boston and Philadelphia is as large as the business will admit. Only one maker in six or seven, therefore, has the opportunity of rising into the higher division where the wages received during the short seasons are sufficient, if expended with foresight and economy, to tide a girl over the dull season without aid from other sources.