

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CONSUMER

BY FLORENCE KELLEY,
General Secretary, National Consumers' League.

The prime responsibility of the consuming public is its own ignorance. At the close of every public meeting at which the aims of the Consumers' League are presented, people who look intelligent come to the speaker and say, "This is an entirely new idea to me. I never knew that things are as you describe them. What can we do about it?" The principal task of the League is, therefore, to enlighten men and women who are eager to do right if they can but know what is right. What then are the sources of knowledge available for the consumer to-day?

Some of them lie ready at hand. Everyone can see how small is the newsboy in the street. If, in buying papers, we give the preference to big boys, we use the obvious means to encourage big boys and discourage little ones in the newspaper business in the streets. And nothing could be more clearly our duty than this. If the public refused outright to buy papers from little newsboys as effectively as it long ago ceased to buy hair shirts and horsehair furniture, no little newsboys would be undergoing a daily process of ruin and demoralization upon our city streets.

Everyone can see, too, how big or little is the messenger and telegraph boy who comes to the home or the office. It costs only a postal card or a telephone call to protest to the management that we prefer to be served by big messengers, not little ones. Whenever enough people refuse to be served by boys as messengers, our telegrams and messages will be delivered by men as responsible and trustworthy as the uniformed letter carriers of Uncle Sam.

Everyone can see, in the stores, how big and how little are the cash children. If a child is undersized, I do not wish to be served by her, even though she may have working papers. She should be sent to the country to recuperate and attain the normal stature of a child of her age if she be really fourteen or fifteen years of age. To be served by undersized children is no better than to be served by underaged children. In both cases alike the consumer is the indirect

employer and can by no means escape a share in the moral responsibility for the employment.

When enough women act upon the conviction that girls should be in school—not in retail trade—until they are fifteen or sixteen years old, the weary little cash girl will follow the duel and the lottery into the memories of a sinful past.

The newsboys, then, and the cash children we can see for ourselves, together with the messengers and the lads who deliver goods for the milkman and grocer. The careless ordering of groceries to be delivered in homes in the evening is a source of overwork and cruelly long hours for thousands of delivery boys every Saturday night in the year. And there is the less excuse for this because these boys come directly under the eye of the housewife who is their ruthless indirect employer.

The second obvious means of getting knowledge of our unseen young servants, is the voluntary organization of consumers acting through visiting committees or executive secretaries. Thus the Consumers' League of the City of New York has had, for nine years, the same visiting committee who confer with merchants on the interesting subjects of hours, wages, seats, vacations, Saturday half-holidays, lunch and rest rooms, and all other points affecting the welfare of the young workers and the consciences of the customers who are their indirect employers.

This committee verifies and rectifies its information from the point of view of the young wage-earners themselves, by a widely ramified acquaintance in working-girls' clubs, vacation houses, settlement classes, and many other sources of information.

The National Consumers' League goes beyond the store to the factory, and in one narrow field of manufacture, that of women's and children's white stitched underwear, awards the use of its label to manufacturers who employ no children below the age of sixteen years, give out no work to be done away from their own premises, employ no one longer than ten hours in one day, and obey the state factory law.

At present it is, however, only a small part of the mass of young workers about whom we can get sufficient, trustworthy information through our own observation or by means of voluntary organizations. How then, are we to act intelligently about these other unseen young servants?

The most immediate and accessible source of knowledge, everywhere, is the educational authority. No one knows so well as the public school teachers, how the children drop out of school from the third and fourth grades to go to work.

A community without a school census is a relic of barbarism. Unfortunately, we still have many such relics, and there is no more interesting and enlightening task awaiting the inquiring consumer than an effort to get from the local educational authority an accurate knowledge of the whereabouts of the children. How many are there in the city? Of these, how many are enrolled in the schools? What are the children doing who are not enrolled? What are the irregulars doing when they are absent from school? If we honestly wish to know how far we are indirectly employing little ones who should be in the primary grades, one way to learn the truth is to insist upon full answers to these questions, each in her own community. When these answers are wholly satisfactory, we may claim to be doing pretty well in our home town. But where are the answers to these questions wholly satisfactory to-day?

In some of the states, there is a good deal of trustworthy information, in readable form, which we can get without expense (beyond the cost of a postal card) from the Department of Labor or the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In this respect, New York excels all the other states, for the Department of Labor issues monthly summaries, quarterly bulletins, and annual reports distributed promptly while the information which they contain is still fresh and valuable. From these sources we can learn, for this one great industrial state, how many children are found at work legally and illegally, exactly what provisions of the labor law apply to them, and how these provisions are enforced, how many violations of the law are found and what penalties are inflicted upon the law-breakers.

In other states, notably in Massachusetts, the Department of Labor Statistics publishes a careful study of child labor from different points of view.

Many state departments are, however, so dilatory that their facts are obsolete before they are published. This is always true when the reports are biennial as is the case in a shamefully large number of states. But belated, obsolete information is misleading and therefore, when presented as current, is worse than acknowledged ignorance.

Sometimes the official reports are so badly compiled that they seem designed to conceal the truth. This is conspicuously true in Pennsylvania, from whose reports it is impossible to learn with any certainty in what industries children are employed, what violations of the child labor law occur, by whom it is violated, or how violations are punished, if at all.

Sadder still, is the plight of the conscientious, inquiring consumer in those states which, like South Carolina and Georgia, envelop the whole subject in Stygian darkness, having no factory inspection, no truant officers, no school census, no bureau of labor statistics, no state census half way between the years of the federal census, no state department of education, no public source, whatever, of the information which we so urgently need.

The policy of these states accentuates the need for a Children's Bureau in the Department of the Interior, at Washington, from which might be sent out all that information which we have now no adequate means of acquiring.

The investigation of the work of women and children now being carried on by the Federal Department of Labor fails to meet the need for current information since its results, like those of all federal investigations hitherto on this vitally important subject, will be already largely obsolete before they reach the reader.

None of this inadequacy and failure is inevitable. When enough citizens demand current, trustworthy, readable information, the authorities will furnish it. The most urgent responsibility of the consumer is thus clearly to deal with her own ignorance by every possible means,—to observe the visible working children, and to insist upon obtaining from the city, state and federal officials fresh and valid information about the unseen ones.

A modest attempt to help in this process is the publication by the Consumers' League, of the Handbook of Child Labor Legislation, which shows in compact form where the need of legislation is greatest, and what has been accomplished for the protection of the children and incidentally for the consciences of their indirect employers, the consuming public.

Having knowledge, the next link in the chain is the use of the facts. Let us give the preference in our dealing to the merchant who employs large help; let us make it commercially valuable to a manufacturer when he follows the example of the enlightened mer-

chant. Let us publish far and wide the recommended list of merchants offered by the Consumers' Leagues in the various cities. Let us make it as disreputable to be seen coming out of a store in the late afternoon, or on Saturday afternoon, as it is to be seen coming out of a saloon.

Finally, the desecration of Christmas, the association of cruel overwork with the Christmas holidays, is wholly the fault of the shopping public. There need never again be a cruel Christmas. That rests entirely with the Christian shoppers. It is their responsibility.