

## STATEMENT OF AN AMATEUR PITBROW WORKER.



**H**AVING read much controversy on the merits or demerits of pitbrow work for women, I was anxious to form a fair opinion on the subject at first hand. I went to Wigan and tried to get a job as a pitbrow worker at the Park Lane Collieries. I had some friends among the pitbrow women who put me in touch with the

authorities, and eventually it was decided that I should take the work of a woman who was off ill. Having heard the pitbrow workers described in some of the more sensational newspapers as rough and uncivilised in their way of life, I determined to put this to the test. I lodged in one of their houses, but in a friendly fashion, being treated in all ways as one of the family, sharing their bedroom and their meals, giving a hand with the baby, and helping to tidy up when I came back from work. Through this practical experience I think I may claim an intimate knowledge of the tone and general atmosphere of these workers' home life. The food was plain and good, the bread home-baked. The general impression was that of self-respecting, thriving working people. The women were good looking and well built, hard workers, and cheerful and pleasant people. At that time trade was bad, and the miners (who were, of course, on piece-work) had been put on a bad seam of coal. Indeed, often enough after paying out of their earnings their drawers' fixed wage, little enough was left for household expenses. The women's wages are poor, as women's wages always are compared to men's, but seem to be very much on a level with other trades, varying, roughly speaking, between 10s. and 12s. In spite of this fact there was no great air of distress or poverty. One of the women, my colleague and friend at the pitbrow, had started life at the cotton mill as a weaver, but her chest being delicate she changed her occupation in accordance with the modern medical theory of open air life for consumptives, and since she had worked in the open air on the pitbrow had never had a day's illness. My first day's work in the pitbrow began with the initial difficulty of clothes. With the assistance of Annie, my friend, I arrayed myself in the picturesque costume of the pitbrow worker—a short, dark skirt, simple and workmanlike, a dark blouse ending in the neck with a handkerchief firmly bound round to prevent the filtration of coal-dust. Over my shoulders was pinned a small plaid shawl for the same purpose, and my head was tied up in a red handkerchief, over which was fastened a padded grey plaid bonnet. The skirt was turned up in front and was covered by a "Hardinge" apron. The wooden soled clogs that I wore for the first time caused me a little anxiety on my two miles' walk to work, but the costume was otherwise very comfortable, and I got used to the clogs in a few days. We set forth at six o'clock, carrying our cans of tea and a basket of food for the day. Arriving at the mine we went to the cabin set apart for the girls, putting our tea-tins to keep hot on the shelf over the grate, where a magnificent fire was burning, the sort of fire you

expect to find in the neighbourhood of a coal mine. Then the bell rang and we knew it was 6-30, and went on the brow and took our places to start work. My first job was to take out "tally tags" from the bottom of the coal buckets and to hang them on the special peg assigned to each miner. Then I had to run the empty buckets into the cage in which they were sent down to the mine. Then I took turns at the work of starting the full buckets on their course over the steel plates to the weighing machine presided over by the check-weighman, who rapped vigorously on his window if I did not run the buckets accurately on to the machine. Though the buckets are heavy in themselves, holding from eight to nine hundredweight of coal, the wheels run easily over the steel plate, and the work itself cannot be called anything but light as you can start the bucket on its career by a sharp pull with two fingers. From the weighing machine I had to guide the faltering footsteps of the buckets as far as the kecker, a machine that reverses the buckets and tumbles the coal on to the belt.

At eight o'clock a bell rang for breakfast, a meal which I thoroughly enjoyed, boiling an egg and eating it in my pocket handkerchief, accompanied by bread and butter and hot tea. My appetite was only checked by the remembrance that my mid-day meal was to come out of my basket. My anxiety on the tea question was somewhat relieved by a kindly pick-sharpener, who gave me a share of his superfluous tea at dinner-time. The meal hours were 8 to 8-30 for breakfast, 12 to 1 for dinner. Work stopped when the last miner came up from the mine, usually between 5 and 6. They started coming up at 4 o'clock, but the women remained on duty till they heard the welcome sound of "Cobbler," which for some unexplained reason was the cry of the last man up. A week passed in this way; I worked on the brow roughly speaking from 6-30 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, I arrived home at 6-30, not over tired but glad of a wash and a meal. On the way each evening I had to be called to order by the other girls by forgetting the fashionable bye-law that one should always reverse one's apron to show the clean side to one's friends. After tea I was quite revived and able to lend a hand in the housework, but I was amazed when after that was done Annie suggested a walk over rough country as a suitable end to the evening. However, I felt ashamed to show of my town-bred degeneracy and stepped out manfully, though the change back from clogs to boots was distinctly trying.

The next week's work was done on the belt, which was of course a new experience. Armed with a pick and a hammer I

attacked the lumps of coal on the belt and sorted out the waste (technically known as dirt). This has to be done smartly as the belt is constantly moving, but it is not heavy work as there are several workers on the belt and one finds what the other misses.

The two kinds of work on the brow and the belt are the principal occupations of women on the pitbrow, and I found in my own experience the work neither offensive nor heavy.

The pitbrow of each mine has its own traditions and the Park Lane brow was very severe on the conventions of clothing. I brought a large shawl which I was not permitted to wear, the proper fashion being a man's coat (cast off by your male relatives). To get one of the right cut and toil-worn appearance I had to borrow it from a painter. I found it very practical to work in in cold weather. Thinking that the fine physique of the women in the Park Lane Collieries might be exceptional, I took occasion to go over other mines in the neighbourhood, and was much struck by the healthy, breezy look of the workers. When so much work is done now-a-days under bad conditions, ill-ventilated, and unhealthy rooms, from a medical point of view it seems all important that this work should be kept open for women who are peculiarly likely to profit from its healthy out-of-door nature, and good exercise.

The callous and unjustifiable attempt to legislate away the means of livelihood of these workers impresses on one the absolute urgent necessity for women to gain the Franchise to protect their industrial interests from political interference.

The case of the pitbrow women will surely make clear to those Members of Parliament who have any sympathy with the workers, the need for passing the Women's Suffrage Conciliation Bill into law at once.

[Since writing the above I find that the hours have been shortened to eight a day and the work lightened by the introduction of automatic machinery to push off the buckets on their journey over the steel plates to the weighing machine on the brow.]

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