

WOMEN'S
CO-OPERATIVE GUILD.

The
Guild Yesterday
and To-day

ISSUED BY THE
CENTRAL COMMITTEE.

17, GREAT PRESCOT STREET,
LONDON, E. 1.

To be obtained from the Women's Co-operative Guild,
~~14, John Street, Bedford Row, London, W.C. 1.~~

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FIFTY YEARS AGO.

A Jubilee is always an interesting event, and especially in the case of so virile an organisation as the Women's Co-operative Guild, which seems all the healthier for its fifty active years of sometimes stormy and always vigorous life.

In telling the story of the Guild one can only do so by indicating the background of social changes which have taken place during the period mentioned, social changes for which the Guild is, in a measure, more than proportionately responsible.

The changes in women's life and outlook during the past fifty years are little less than revolutionary. I remember being at a lantern lecture a short time ago in which one of the pictures depicted a scene in which women were walking through the streets in the clothing fashion of about twenty years ago, and there was a burst of laughter from the younger members of the audience at the, to them, absurd figures of the time. Woman's dress has been absolutely transformed, and no one can say it is not for the better. It is more hygienic, more beautiful, and it is more self-respecting. They have ceased to trail up the dust at every step; their limbs are not hampered by long and heavy skirts, and, in fact, they have made strides far beyond the other sex, who painfully struggle on in the habiliment of other days. And what applies to dress applies to other things as well.

There used to be a soap, or some article, which advertised everywhere on the hoardings in huge letters the startling question: "Why does a woman look old sooner than a man?" It seemed quite natural in those days, but would any firm dare to ask such a question to-day? There has been a vast improvement in public health, and the average length of life has, we are informed by competent authorities, been increased by about twelve years for men and fourteen years for women. The causes of this improvement have been largely due to improvements in measures of public health, in which the Women's Guild has done its share, but partly also to the emancipation of women from the unhygienic modes of living of the nineteenth century and the correlative better treatment of children. For children have shared in the emancipation of their mothers. What mother nowadays would think of swathing her offspring in the bundles of clothing which at one time used to be thought necessary, and which are now seen to have been hindrances to their free development.

CHANGES IN HOME LIFE.

Clothing may not seem a serious subject, but it is a symbol of the general movement for emancipation that has made, and is making, the women's movement so important a factor in the future. And so with other developments. At one time it was not only a statement, but almost a commandment, that "woman's work is never done." It is often too true to-day, but it cannot be denied that the world is moving in the direction of making that work less exacting and giving greater opportunities of leisure. Modern improvements in housing are lightening the lot of women. Take, for example, such

a thing as the supply of hot water. The only way in the old days was to boil all the water on the kitchen fire at a large expenditure of fuel and labour. Hot and cold water on tap was an exception. Now it is in the way of becoming the rule.

And so with other matters. The provision of many household gadgets, which at one time were luxuries, have made home life less laborious and have given greater opportunities to women to use their leisure for amusement and intellectual culture. In those days, too, there were very few cheap amusements for the use of the people. The public house was the chief one, and the misery brought into homes by the abuse of liquor was very terrible. Now sobriety is the rule rather than the exception. With all its faults the cinema has provided a healthier and better substitute, and the provision of brighter and better public libraries has also been a factor in widening the outlook of working men and women.

THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN.

In the days of the beginning of the Guild very little indeed was done for the education of women, and such as there was was confined to the moneyed classes. It was not considered the thing for a woman, unless of an aristocratic family, to busy herself with matters of politics and public work. The co-operative movement has the honour of being one of the movements which has from the start given the same rights to women as men in the affairs of the movement, though even here there had to be a struggle to put these rights into operation.

It is pathetic and amusing to read of one of the first presidents of the Guild deprecating women "imitating or competing with men, pushing themselves

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into positions which had hitherto been held by men, speaking on platforms or thrusting themselves on to management committees, where they would be liable to be laughing stocks or stumbling blocks," and that the 1884 Congress at Edinburgh decided there should be "no platform speaking, no advertising, no going out of our woman's place." But this spirit was very soon nipped in the bud, and the Guild made its presence felt both in co-operative and political affairs, and was the pioneer of women's real emancipation so far as the working classes are concerned.

I think the contrast between the past and present is comprised in the remark recently made that "a hundred years ago a girl could go nowhere unprotected; to-day there is nowhere she cannot go." This growing position of women in social and political life, and her increasing self-respect and dignity, have made possible great social changes in other directions. If the Guild is, to some extent, the product of this development, it is also in no small degree, a pioneer, and the history of the Guild is the history of the movement for women's emancipation from the prejudices of the past.

It is very amusing in these days to look back at the awful predictions that were made of how the world would be turned topsy-turvy if women had the same political and social freedom as men. It is true that changes have taken place, but so far they have been for the better, and it is interesting to note how all parties and classes have accepted the inevitable fact that woman has come into her own. "The slave owner is bound down by the chains of his slaves," said an old writer, and the master can only free himself when he has given freedom to his slaves. And so freedom for women is not "the monstrous regiment of women," but is greater freedom for the race.

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THE NEW ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHILDREN.

The treatment of children has also been revolutionised, and much of this again is due to that progressive spirit of which the Guild has always been a pioneer and active supporter. It is always the case that those who suffer the lowest standard of life are the most prolific, and with improved social and economic conditions, small as that improvement may be, there has been a tendency towards a lower birth rate, which has operated with increasing force as it became obvious that there would not be the increasing trade to support the younger generation. This tendency has been reinforced by the growth of political intelligence, and women nowadays are seeking not quantity but quality with regard to their offspring. This, on the other hand, is tending to free the mother from the terrible strain of incessant child-bearing. It used to be a common thing to boast of the largeness of one's family; people now prefer to look at their quality.

The result has been greater freedom for the mother. It has also been a wonderful change for the child. The old days when Solomon's motto, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," was generally quoted have passed entirely. Our schools are havens of peace and beauty in comparison with what they used to be, which only illustrates how bad they were. For there is still a tremendous way to go. Margaret MacMillan has taught us the wonderful possibilities of young child life, but there are still very few nursery schools in the country, and the tendency is to reduce education to a lower standard. The Guild will have its hands full for some time in defending the present standard, low as it is, but there is no doubt that our efforts will not be lost, and that ultimately we shall reach the goal of social

co-operation, for which we have always striven. School meals, school clinics, school medical service, school physical development, the widening of the school curriculum to make history, travel, poetry, and science no longer dreary exercises of memory, but interesting insights into the life of the world; and, along with these, beautiful buildings with sunlight, playgrounds, and well-ventilated rooms, besides special schools for those unfortunate enough to be deprived of one or more of their normal faculties, have revolutionised our elementary education, and it is for us to maintain and improve what has been achieved.

THE NEED FOR OUR GUILD ORGANISATION.

The increasing influence of women in public affairs means that the need for the Guild, as an organisation of married working women, is greater than ever before. Women are in a better position to organise than they were in the past days of their seclusion, and an organisation of women can become more of a power in the country. The fact that there are now scores of women's organisations, whereas thirty or forty years ago the Guild was almost unique, does not mean that the Guild is no longer needed, but rather that women's organisations of all kinds are needed, and the Guild, in particular, has a special function of its own, which no other body can fulfil.

So long as mothers and children are under-nourished lives are lost or maimed unnecessarily in childbirth, and so long as children do not receive a complete and adequate education there will be work for the Guild to do. There is another question, too, with which all these matters are closely linked up, and that is the question of peace and

disarmament. While there are so many conflicting ideas as to the best way to bring about the reduction of armaments, the Guild will need to go forward with renewed vigour with its peace propaganda, for the only way to bring about this necessary change is total universal disarmament.

The fact that there are setbacks even to-day in the progress of the women's movement only proves the need for organisation. The reason for the bitter attack that is being made against married women at the present time, reducing their sick benefits, cutting their unemployment pay, and depriving them of that fundamental human right, the right to support themselves and to earn their own living, is simply because of their lack of organisation and collective resistance. And because married women are even less well organised than single ones they have to bear the brunt of the worst attack, and are treated not as human beings, with desires of their own, to marry or not to marry, to work or not to work, but as some peculiar species of sub-normal humanity are forced into complete dependence upon their menfolk. It is not possible to put the clock back, however, try as they may.

In bygone days, when married women made bread, jams, pickles, clothes, and all kinds of things in the home, no one objected to their working, for it was unpaid labour. It was only when man, by the introduction of mass production in factories and workshops, took this work out of the home, which meant it had to be paid for, that an outcry arose about married women's labour. It is not only possible, but essential, for women to insist upon their equal status with men, and to unite so strongly in organisations like the Guild, the "mothers' trade union," that reactionary powers are not able to thrust these

indignities upon them, but, rather, will be forced to carry out the wishes of thinking, organised women.

The Guild is, of course, first and foremost a co-operative organisation, and as the movement is essentially a women's movement, built up by women through their purchasing power, and catering mainly for women as consumers, the part played by the Guild in the movement will naturally be an increasingly large one. As the co-operative movement is based, and rightly, on the equal status of men and women, it is very necessary for the Guild to press forward its policy of claiming that equality, by the election of many more women on all the committees of the movement. The recent trend of events seems to indicate that the overthrow of the present capitalist system may be more quickly brought about by the economic power of the co-operative movement than had been believed possible. This opens up another sphere of Guild work, and also illustrates the importance of the Guild as a co-operative organisation, fully conscious of its responsibilities and ultimate aims. The Guild has always worked for a new system of society, and at no time is there greater need for this work than at present.

GUILDWOMEN AND THE FUTURE.

Owing to the new status of women and their greater opportunities, women's organisations have a greater importance and more possibilities than ever before. Every woman to-day is able to take up interests outside her own domestic circle, and it is of vital significance both to herself and to the nation that those interests will contribute towards the progress of humanity. It is here that an organisation like the Guild is of such importance, since it links the ordinary working-class woman of to-day with the great world outside her home, and shows her the

part she can play in making that world a better and happier place for those that come after her. Through the Guild the average woman is able to learn how the country is governed, and how the present capitalist system, under which we live, affects herself and her family. With this knowledge she soon finds that she is able to play a direct part, not only in bringing about practical reforms, such as saving the lives of mothers who die in childbirth, but also in substituting for the present system, with its evils of poverty, greed, and injustice, a better one that is based on principles of brotherhood and the welfare of humanity.

For in this period of transition it is to women that the world must look for help. The system of production and of using Nature's gifts to provide the most wonderful things that the human being can desire has been brought to perfection. It is man who has perfected this system, inventing all kinds of machinery and devising all kinds of methods for producing in abundance all that can be thought of, and great credit is due for this. Yet the ultimate abiding place of everything that is produced or manufactured, with perhaps the exception of armaments, is the home, and the tragedy is that although this wonderful system of production has been built up, no system has yet been evolved for getting these productions into the home, and the problem of distribution remains unsolved and in a state of complete chaos. It may be here that women will be able to make their contribution, for an entirely new outlook is needed. The work of women in organising and building up the home has always been belittled, although the very materials they need for it are considered important while they are being made in factories. It is because human beings and their welfare

have been considered of less importance than material gain that the larger portion of humanity to-day is starving in the midst of plenty, and surely it is the influence of women, who know the value of lives because of their function of creating life, that should change this point of view. Perhaps what is most needed at the present time is the closer working together of men and women, so that woman, with her practical mind and long experience of home and family, can help to solve this problem of distribution by changing from a system of private profit and individual gain to one of co-operation. The outlook of both men and women will need to be altered, so that both, with a new vision, can go forward towards a new world.

Now that women have won the privileges of citizenship and the right to political power they have to learn how to use that power. This involves a great deal of thought, training, and education, but it can be learned in the Guildroom. Women are on the threshold of a world that can be organised, as the home is, in the interests of all rather than for the benefit of a few, and the Guild gives them the key to open this door. Women take no responsibility for the failure of the present man-made system, but it rests with them to see that it is replaced by another that woman's influence will make better and nobler, and where men and women will work side by side for the welfare and happiness of the human race.

