

"Shall Women Work?" by Elizabeth Robins

IX. Shall Women Work? By ELIZABETH ROBINS 899

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SHALL WOMEN WORK? ¹

IT seems probable that a good many will be inclined to think that the question, "Shall Women Work?" has been decided in the affirmative, once for all, by the pressure of modern life.

But nothing in this world is finally settled that is not settled for the good of the world.

Those who think there is no longer any serious difference of opinion about women's working, should be reminded of the people (more numerous and more influential than we may like to admit) who are convinced it is not for the good of the world that women should work.

Now if people who represent that opinion are unable to bring about what they hold will be a better state of society, they can at least retard the day many people are trying to hasten—the day when women will be as free to work as men are.

I stop a moment to deny that it is woman's physical weakness that makes question of her fitness for work. She is the drudge of the world. She sweats over all the cooking-stoves of Christendom. She is a pit lassie in the north. She is an agricultural labourer in the south. She makes bricks and bicycles in the Midlands. In Germany she is still harnessed alongside a dumb beast and drags a loaded cart.

I think we will not question her physical capacity—though I have wondered why, when people discuss her staying-power, no one seems to remember her record in a profession where (though she is necessarily hard-worked) she has long been well-treated and well-paid. Anyone who knows the life of the stage knows it is an arduous one. Yet there are thousands of girls and women (not chosen as being the most robust of their sex) who are able to play long, exhausting parts night after night, ten months at a stretch, throughout a lifetime. I have known women do that in America, where, in addition to the strain of such journeys as no actress makes in England, it was the custom, not only to play on Sunday night (as well as every other), but to play a matinée as well, making ten performances a week. Even in many first-class companies there was not always an understudy for the leading lady. She was expected never to be ill—never to fail her manager. She did not fail him. I never knew a theatre closed on her account.

I do not deny that the new generation of hockey-playing out-of-door girls will have far more strength and infinitely better

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chances than we had. But even the old-fashioned sort of woman got through too much sustained hard work for fair-minded people to say she hasn't the strength to work. Whether it is good for her is another matter. Before dealing with our main question, let us inquire, firstly : *Is work a good or an evil thing?*

Secondly : *Is it specially injurious for women—working on the same terms as men?*

Thirdly : *What is the connection, if any, between women's wages and women's franchise?*

As to the essential good or evil of work, the more closely one looks into that matter, the more clear it seems that the old curse upon work was really levelled against overwork, or against work under evil conditions. The independent people, even the excessively rich, sometimes work. They sometimes overwork. Nobody in all the labour world has worked harder than the great artists—unless it be certain self-made millionaires. Why do such people work hard? Because their work interests them, fascinates them, makes all so-called recreation a labour and a penance.

Nature starts us all fair in this great enterprise. We begin life thinking very gallantly about work. When first we come across it, it has so few terrors for us we call it by the gayer name of play. "Let everything be done to building," says the Apostle. The principle is the same whether the building be visible or invisible. Now, every little boy and girl alive agrees with St. Paul as to the paramount necessity for building.

The child builds his house of blocks for joy. The man building later might have no less joy. We all know men with whom the passion for building has not lessened, but grown with their growth. Most of us remember the rapture of the tool box. There are people of ripe age in the world who have had to work a lifetime with their brains, and are not yet cured of that first joy of working with their hands. I know a little girl who has playthings enough for a dozen, wax dolls and expensive mechanical toys. Two things give her most pleasure. One is alive; it is a cat. The other is a little rack of housewife's implements, small brooms, brushes, a dustpan, a dustcloth. Seventeen men and women servants in that house call the use of similar implements "work." The child finds no play such good fun as imitating what she sees them do. Even a little boy, overcome by the fascinations of the long-haired hearth-brush, was ready to do battle for exclusive use of it. My point is : the joy those fortunate children feel has no real need to die. One of the things we most pity the poor for is that in them the joy of work has been killed so early. By nature we all, men, women, and children alike—all who are

born healthy and live unperverted—have a sense of joy in making something. The sick, the old, the sweated—they are the ones who shrink. Not to have to work? Why, it is the ideal of the superannuated servant—the poor soul who, though giving up “service,” cannot give up the servile mind.

For the masters of the world to have to give up work is humiliation; it is acceptance of defeat.

But this thing that is so prized by the freest and most gifted among men is not good, some say, for women; or good only in modified, sternly restricted form—like certain poisons.

It is bad, they say, answering the second of my questions, unqualifiedly bad, for women to work on the same terms as men. Some of these would-be reformers value woman so highly that they cannot abide the notion of her working for a living on any terms. Instead of giving better opportunities for wage-earning, they would see the poor woman (above all, the poor married woman) legislated out of such liberty as she now possesses.

Of the suggestion made some time ago in this direction by the President of the Local Government Board, I may as well confess at once, many women find it difficult to speak quite patiently. And they are the same women who feel so strongly that mothers should have the best conceivable opportunity to do well by their children, that they would not leave this supreme consideration to the tender mercies of modern industrialism.

Now what is it the President of the Local Government Board proposes? That the State should help poor married women to give the State worthy citizens? Oh, no. He proposes merely that the earning power of a certain class shall be destroyed by Act of Parliament.

You might think that poor mothers went out to work, as a person might go to a public-house, for recreation or oblivion. But that is to misunderstand the matter.

Even to the women of wider cultivation, of many interests—women who have had happy experience away from home, in the world's wide playground—to the majority even of those women there is nothing so interesting, so absorbing, as their children. It is proverbial that the less self-critical mother makes a bore of herself to other folk by her tendency to narrow down all life to the limits of the nursery. It is only by an effort she remembers that little Lucy's charms and little Tommy's precocities are not as engrossing topics to all men as they are to her.

A woman of the world, without children, but not without wisdom, said to me last Christmas: “When I want to give my contemporaries real joy I invite them to come and watch their children at a party.” That woman understood human nature.

The instinct she so justifiably appealed to is intensified in the poor woman. She has little outlet for either thought or action except in her home. To the woman threatened by this new tendency in legislation her children are society; her children are story books; they are drama and pictures, poetry and ambition, and—the Future. Now what is it that drives a poor woman to turn her back on all that, and to sit, day in, day out, minding a wheel in a mill? Legislators must be made to realise that the instinct urging women of that sort out of their homes is a very precious thing. Perhaps it is the most precious thing in nature. There are those who say it is the corner-stone of civilisation, for it is the instinct to lift up the standard of life. In women the most common expression of that impulse is the attempt to do the best for the children. Those working women to whom Mr. John Burns would presume to teach their maternal duty have no perverted passion for factory or mill. Their passion is to keep a roof over the family, better food on the table, warm clothing on the children, a little store for the inevitable sickness, a more decent standard of home-keeping for ill-paid husband and all. Are these hard-driven women to be denied the right to choose between the greater evil of semi-starvation and the lesser evil of confiding their young children to an older child, or, as often happens, to the grandmother, or to someone incapacitated for work out of the home? Does some gentleman in the Cabinet—does any man anywhere—care more about the welfare of those children than their mother does? Let *her* decide which of the two evils is the greater. For what Mr. Burns proposes is not, really, that poor mothers should not work. He, better than most men in Parliament, knows that the last thing to be tolerated in a labourer's wife would be her not working. Mr. Burns would forbid her being paid for work—that's all.

In the factory the woman works for stated hours at stated tasks, easily learned, mechanical; and for that receives the few shillings that make all the difference to the little home between being pinched and being fairly comfortable. At the factory she does one woman's work and is paid for it. At home she is not paid at all, and is expected to fill the offices of half-a-dozen women. Not for certain hours only, but uninterruptedly from dawn till dark (and through much of the night, if the children are young or there is sickness), the wageless mother does the work of nurse, cook, housemaid, seamstress, charwoman, and laundress; and for all that her reward may be to see her children go hungry. No; paradox as it sounds, those women must be allowed to work in order not to overwork.

But let us be fair. Let us confess that the President of the

Local Government Board is not alone in his superficial thinking on the subject.

We have heard even good suffragists—I recall one very influential, who has been heard to say: "I want a vote in order that I and others like-minded may help on legislation against woman's working outside her own home, so that she shall devote herself to her children."

You would suppose, to hear these people talk, that two things were inevitable:—

First, that every woman must have children to see to.

Second, even if we agree to confine our attention strictly to the women with children, we are asked to go farther. We are asked to suppose that these children never, never grow up!

It is useless to say to such folk that, on the one hand, not every woman has children, and that, on the other, in spite of love and care, some women's children die. No! the bereaved mother, the childless widow, and the incorrigibly maiden—they none of them deserve to be considered. Away with them!

The mind of reformers such as these is stamped indelibly—is wholly engrossed by the picture of the woman with the child at her breast. I am as ready as my neighbour to admit the beauty and significance of that picture. But it is mere thoughtless sentimentality to wish to legislate for all women at all times of their lives, as though the Madonna picture represented the static, the only possible aspect of the adult woman; as though the years that lead up to that beautiful moment, and the years that lead onward, after the child has grown out of the mother's arms—as though all the rest of life were of no consequence to the mother and of no account to society.

The more scientific presumption seems to be that the mother will fare better, and the child will fare better when motherhood resumes its ancient place—not made the super-specialised function which, as at present (partly on account of that very super-specialisation), is a function often very poorly carried out. Motherhood is not, as the weaklings would have us believe, a kind of malady. It is one of the conditions of health. In certain tribes still upon the earth, living much in the open air, nomadic, close to nature, the woman has been known to fall out of the ranks of the migrating group, to lie down by the wayside, and give birth to a child, to rise up in an hour or two, and, with the infant in her arms, appear that same evening in the camp of her people. One does not quote that as an ideal, except of health—of the woman's freedom from the valetudinarian view of her great, and wholesome office.

The fact that needs to be emphasised is that, if it lives, the

youngest child grows up. In the minds of those persons obsessed by the difficulty, the danger, and the all-devouring preoccupation of the maternal task, no child ever grows up. The mother's life must be absorbed by it, not only for a few years, but forever.

Now in this country, more and more, marriage is postponed. In the great middle class, more and more, women do not marry till close upon, in many cases not till after, thirty. From the point of view of the race good and the individual good, I regard this as regrettable. But we are dealing with these conditions as we find them.

Is a woman, then, to do nothing with the eager and vigorous years until she marries—except look out for a husband? If she does not marry till she is thirty there will only be an average of ten or twelve years out of her whole life, during which she may be bearing children and ministering to their infant needs, till the time comes when the youngest, the last, is out of her arms. At the beginning of middle life even the woman with children finds that for many hours of every day, if not (as in the great middle class) for most months of the year, the children are not only out of her arms, they are out of the house; they are at school. But certain reformers seem not to know this. They think the children are all still wailing on the maternal breast. As a matter of fact, the mother has come to the time of life when she is less preoccupied by private concerns than ever before. And in many ways she is better equipped. Her sympathies are broadened. Her judgment has ripened. Her intelligence is at its keenest. She has gone long enough upon that adventure we all embark upon as children—the finding out what the world is like, and, most pressing quest of all, what one's self is like. At forty odd she knows the answer to a number of questions. At last she understands the game. Now it is in this phase of her life that for a certain type of man (I don't say for all, but, let us say, for most legislators) the woman has ceased to have any interest or any meaning, unless in her narrowest family relation to himself. Yet the average woman whose children are launched, the woman with her garnered knowledge and her disciplined soul, has reached the time when, if never before, she should be of use outside her immediate home circle. She has discharged only one share of her race debt, if she has accepted the usual destiny. With that rich possession for her background and her enlightenment, there she is!—arrived (as women confess to one another—half afraid of cheap sneers if openly they admit it) at the securest, the least unwise, the serenest, in many ways the best part of her life. What is she to do with it?

Nothing. Or things so petty they make a mock of human

worth. She is to sit with folded hands till her grandchildren give her back some pale reflection of her one permitted task. This is a part of the monstrous waste that goes on in the world. If woman is legislated for at all, it is but to emphasise the fact, not that she is one of the world's two halves, but that she is "the sex," as the eighteenth-century gallant used to put it. For the legislator, too, woman is all sex.

It is well to remember in this connection that it has been made a reproach to us that women are so absorbed in sex matters. It is often quoted as a crowning instance of our unfitness for a share in the great affairs of State—in those high abstractions that occupy the minds of men. Yet what do we find? It is these nobler creatures—it is our pastors and masters—who are most determined to limit woman's experience to one order of activity.

There is, no doubt, a growing proportion of women who are not as convinced as, for instance, Ex-President Roosevelt, of the superlative value to society of the large family. It may be that those women descry improvement rather in the direction of small families, families in which the concern shall be quality rather than quantity. It is not difficult to understand why, in this age of congested industrialism, exploiters of labour wish to see large families the rule. It is not difficult to see why, under a reign of militarism, the same call should be sounded. But neither to fill the factories nor the ranks of armies does the civilised woman exist.

There was once a man before whom all Europe trembled, who said that the greatest woman in France was she who had given birth to the most children. But it was this same Napoleon who gave death to more of the children of women than any one being of modern time. He was the man whose hand lay very heavy on women in other ways—the man who set down in his famous code the law forbidding to the unmarried mother even the attempt to establish the paternity of her child.

When we get to the bottom of the question, we find that what the law-makers mean by "woman shall not work" is: woman shall be restricted to one sort of work. We say: "Let her decide."

She may safely be left to decide, for it is the work she loves best. But not till she undertakes it freely shall we have a race of human beings as uniformly healthy, happy, and comely as a flock of wild birds.

Absolutely the only way to ensure woman's undertaking her great task freely—at Nature's bidding rather than at necessity's—is to give the woman economic independence. Let no one oppose that ideal, and be allowed unchallenged to say he has the

good of the world at heart. So long as women get their living by one order of activity only, so long will some women get their living illegitimately. As Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman so wisely says: "All the social purity societies put together do not equal the trade school as a preventive of vice."

Even the most selfish must presently see what is bound up in this question of women's economic independence. Society is a unit. Evil done in the dark comes to light in the injury done to family life. The wrongs of obscure hard-driven women are avenged on the women in high places—yes, and on the men and on the children.

We would alter that old line that runs :

For men must work and women must weep.

Men must work and women must work, or else both will have good cause for weeping.

We come now to my final question: What is the connection, if any, between women's wages and women's franchise?

Prof. Dicey and Mrs. Humphry Ward say there is no connection.

Well, let us see. To what, in the first place, do they attribute the fact that all over the world the question of woman suffrage is forcing its way to the forefront of practical politics?

If woman suffrage were merely a matter of abstract justice, we know we should not vote till the sons of women are all saints and sages.

Not even "Mrs. Pankhurst and her henchwomen" (as an agitated Liberal paper summed up the direst menace to the Government at the last Newcastle bye-election), not even the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union and the inspired group she has gathered round her at Clement's Inn—not even they could win the vote by the utmost they might do or say or suffer.

If women had not already entered the industries and professions the cause of woman suffrage would not have advanced beyond the status of the pious opinion.

There were women long ago—yes, and men—who saw not alone the justice of this cause; they saw in it the salvation of society. But their vision did not prevail, could not prevail, for the reason that political independence is bound up with economic independence.

In modern society, so deeply involved are these two forms of liberty that until women had attained some measure of one, it was useless for them to hope for the other. Political independence would not be so hard to win, nor so long in coming, if to get that sort of independence you were not obliged to have some

measure of the other sort—though to have a fair measure of either, you must have both. Not that it was necessary for woman to have economic independence before she was needed in public affairs; but that a certain number of the sex had to win economic independence before woman could show in any large and generally convincing way that she realised she was needed, and that, moreover, she was prepared to obey the call!

No single utterance from "the Suffrage side" has roused so much ire as the saying that women's wages will improve when they get the vote. The Anti-Suffrage Society has issued a leaflet pointing out Suffragist teaching upon this matter as perhaps their chief enormity, whereby they mislead the ignorant and the poor—especially at election times—playing upon their ignorance or their greed. It is this tenet of the suffrage creed that most annoys Mrs. Humphry Ward. It drives Prof. Dicey to such fury that he says anyone who preaches this faith is "either grossly ignorant, or may fairly be described as the knave of knaves."

Well, why—thus warned—do we continue to say that wages and votes are intimately connected? Because it is true. And not only true, but demonstrably true. No suffragist says that, by the mere dropping of a ballot paper into a hole, the little political machine will be set humming like a music box, and that, with a tinkle and a chink of gold, sovereigns will straightway pour out in a stream. The suffragist forms her calculations on a more reasonable basis. What is this basis? It is that the laws of economics—unlike Prof. Dicey—have no prejudices on the subject of sex.

Working women realise how stupid they would prove themselves if they were to ignore the object-lesson offered by the working man. Women are not dismayed by the fact that men have not yet (and by themselves) attained conditions absolutely ideal. It is something that since the working man's entrance into practical politics his wages have risen—a rise estimated by such an authority as Mr. Sidney Webb—at so amazing a rate as fifty per cent. Whether by so much, or by less, it is a matter of history that amelioration of the working man's lot (undreamed of in '67 and '84) has kept pace with the broadening of the franchise. Women have watched the English Parliament at work, bringing about the most drastic of these changes. Why should we extract no meaning from the fact that in the Colonies conditions for both men and women wage-earners have been improved since women had the vote? Is it only out of England that good may be effected by wages boards? And, if so, why are certain English politicians so eager to introduce them here? No one denies that the establishment of a minimum wage in

other places has abolished the more flagrant forms of sweating. No one denies that this was a gain especially to women, for women—abroad as well as here, and always—are the first sufferers from exploitation.

But on this side of such large and enlightened measures (as are the glory of New Zealand, for instance) there are other economic advantages inherent in the vote. Women are not such childish thinkers as to suppose that the conditions of labour are not as important as the wage. They are the wage, rightly considered, for they are health and efficiency; they are "the wages of going on." But if we follow the course of English politics alone—I do not mean if we merely read a party newspaper, but if we hear something of all sides; above all, if we watch the forces at work (during an election, for instance)—we will not deny that legislation for the working man is largely conditioned by the voters' pressure upon their representatives in the Commons.

It has come within even my limited experience to have heard ten or twelve years ago a great employer of labour fulminate against the impudence, the rank impossibility of the Workmen's Compensation Act. It would be the death of British industry. Yet I lived not only to see that Act passed, but to hear that same great employer say: "Oh, it's fair enough."

Now who converted him? Not the economists. Not his brother capitalists. The working man converted him. Not by appeals. By the way he voted. As soon as it was clear that the working man meant to send to Parliament the candidate pledged to support that measure, just so soon compensation for men injured in work became "fair enough."

The poor man's point of view is not forgotten in these days, for he is ably represented in the House of Commons. Even the most inarticulate—one would say, most helpless section of men—the unemployed—find friends in Parliament to plead their cause.

But if any body of human beings needed help above all others one might think it would be the unemployed women.

We have not forgotten how the public duty to those defenceless women was interpreted by the authorities. We might have supposed the awful plight of those women, facing starvation in mid-winter, presented every conceivable claim for speedy alleviation. No. Their plight presented every claim *save one*. Nobody was officially responsible for or to them.

But this and similar neglect of women's most crying economic needs is so familiar to all who care about the matter that I will give (very briefly) a single one among the many object-

lessons offered us in America, just to show how little such things depend upon Cabinet *personnel* or upon any merely local conditions.

A woman teacher in a great public school in America instituted an inquiry a little while ago into the reason why, more and more, women teachers, qualified according to custom (by high record and time of service), failed to get promoted to headmistress-ship. Right and left, on every side, men notoriously less well-qualified were advanced over the women's heads. What did it mean? Were women, after success through many years—were they failing all of a sudden in a profession which in America has become peculiarly the educated women's profession? (The well-equipped man gravitates to pursuits offering the greater prizes.) It was, of course, admitted that a certain proportion of women candidates might deserve rejection, but why should this large percentage suddenly be said to have fallen below the standard? Why should even the women already in enjoyment of the better-paid and more honourable posts—why should they, upon obscure or frivolous grounds, be set aside in favour of men? When thoroughly sifted, the matter turned out to be the simple one of votes. The great officials in the Education Department wanted to keep their lucrative offices. To do that meant a careful cultivation of votes. A headmaster was a vote. A headmistress was only a woman qualified to teach.

It is left for the Anti-Suffrage League to deny the close connection between the vote and wages. Not so the practical politician who is against us. He opposes granting the vote on the precise ground that, once women vote, they will insist upon, and they will ultimately get, economic independence.

And then the most dreadful things will happen. I have been reminded of the outcry a few years ago (most people have forgotten it, but there was an outcry) against women's bicycling. Bicycling was not only unladylike, it had the most dire physical results: it unfitted women to be mothers. Persons who, with that fear upon them, were deterred from a wholesome pleasure, lived to see in the great sanatoriums a contrivance by means of which women too weak and ailing to ride bicycles, being mounted on a saddle, were put through an exercise which imitates as closely as possible the action and the effect of bicycle-riding. This exercise is now admitted to be at least innocuous, but exercise of the vote would upset women's delicate machinery beyond repair. So I was told the other day by a distinguished man of science, ornament of many learned societies and one unlearned—the Anti-Suffrage Society. I quote him because he does not share the usual "anti" view. "Votes have nothing to do with wages?"

Stuff and nonsense," said this wearer of many honours, the holder of an enviable public post. "The reason," he said, "that women mustn't be allowed to vote is because, if they did, they'd be altogether too independent. Why, they'd be flooding the learned professions—competing with experts."

"But," I said, "that doesn't alarm you! Our flimsy, illogical minds, you know; our deficient brain weight." (His brain is enormous. But it seems to give him no sense of security.)

"No," he said; "the women would work and cram; yes—oh, they'd pass the examinations! And what next? They'd be wanting the best-paid places! *Getting them!*" I suppose I showed I could bear the thought of that, for he said: "You don't understand what's involved. Those women won't want to do their duty." I thought, in my innocence, he meant their duty by those fat offices they had filched from men. "No no," he said; "I mean, they won't want to marry, those women!" I thought he was wrong, but he was a very learned person, and I didn't like to contradict him. "No," he said angrily, "those women—*they'll prefer to enjoy themselves!*"

"But surely," I said, "married people are not all miserable."

"No," he said, "not at present."

But that, he thought, was because the woman felt settled. If the man wasn't perfection, she just made the best of it. She had to! And great domestic peace had come out of that. But if the wife had a vote and could get a good living independently of her husband, the man would have always to be minding his p's and q's. If he didn't, the minute she didn't like something she'd be banging the front door!

So the only way to make a woman endure wifedom was to cut off all means of escape! No suffragist I ever met thinks so ill of husbands. I told the great man it had been left for him to say quite the worst thing I had ever heard about matrimony.

There are always people ready to be in a panic lest Nature may not be strong enough to keep the race going. It is a delusion that only one-half of humanity can be excused for harbouring. But, indeed, women smile at such a fear. I should like to ask those men who think woman is developing a terrifying disposition to slave at intellectual tasks, and a mighty determination to excel away from home—I should like to ask men who fear the effect of that new tendency, to remember a fact or two. Taking into account the long story of the ages, women are new at earning distinction, except of one sort. Most women know what it is to be held (at some time, by someone) an adept at the old task—the art of pleasing. But a very small proportion of the sex, as yet, knows

the joy of winning independence by means of the better-paid professions. Remember how very new women are at that, and how very often they have been told they couldn't do it! One of the first medical women to receive her degree from a Scottish university was warned by an old doctor (her friend and helper) not to delude herself with the idea that because she had got her degree she was going to get a practice. "Why, some men find that hard enough! Remember!" he said grimly, "remember I warned you—by the time you're able to earn your bread you won't have teeth to eat it with." She earned her bread from the first year.

But women are still a little surprised and excited to find they can do these things. Give them time. When the doors of the professions, instead of being so jealously guarded—or opened, if at all, such a little crack that you must push and squeeze if you're to get through—when the doors are flung wide, only some women will go through them. And those who do will walk in orderly-wise, not pressing and over-straining. The need for that will be no more.

And those that later go in with dignity and come out with honours, they will owe their dignity and their honours to the women who are fighting this hard and dusty fight for enfranchisement. The happy wives and mothers of the future, too, who stay at home, not because they can't do anything else, but because home is for them the best of all possible places, they, too, will owe their fuller measure of usefulness and of content to the suffragist, just as the suffragist, in her turn, owes her power to the women who first forced the doors into the trades and the professions. To the woman teacher and the medical woman, pre-eminently, our debt is incalculable. But every woman mill-hand, every little half-timer (though we hope to eliminate her)—every one of those wage-earning women, may walk her way proudly. She has had her share in the betterment of the world.

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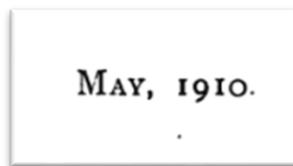
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