

CHILD LIFE vs. DIVIDENDS.

(IRENE ASHBY-MACFADYEN, in American Federationist.)

These are American children dragged into the mills when scarcely out of their babyhood, without education, without opportunity, being robbed of health morally and physically, forced to labor as in the days of negro slavery negro children never were. With their baby hands these little slaves are undermining the liberties of the future, not only of the cotton operatives of the South, but of the American working people; nor only of the working people, but of the community in which they for good or evil are to play so large a part.

And what is the universal reply to your question, "Why are they there?"

They are there, it is said, "to attract Northern capital," a scathing comment on both those who sell and those who ask the sale. The Southern states of America are the only section of the world where the crime of infant labor is permitted, a crime which if not quickly wiped out will write itself large on economic and industrial history, to the everlasting shame of the people of America.

Take the number of the children employed! Statistics are very difficult to obtain. In quoting figures it is to be remembered that we are not dealing with the denser population of the North and East. The whole population of Alabama, more than one-third of which is negro, and does not count in this connection, is only about the same as the city of Chicago.

There is but one of the Southern states in which there is a Labor Commission—North Carolina. Mr. B. R. Lacey, as Labor Commissioner, gives in his last report 7,605 children under 14 employed in 261 mills. Taking this as a general average would give at least 20,000 children under 14 in the textile mills of the South.

The Cincinnati Post recently sent a correspondent through the South to investigate the subject of child labor, simply as a matter of news, and particularly cautioned him not to exaggerate. Out of at least one thousand children employed in five mills in Columbia, S. C., he estimates 400 to be under 12 years of age. Applying this proportion to the above figures, would give at the very lowest computation, little children, infants between 6 and 12, as operatives. He spoke personally to numbers of children, who said they were seven and eight, and others who were so little they did not know their own ages.

In Alabama, they estimate that there are at least twelve hundred

children, or between 6 and 7 per cent of all the operatives. In Georgia, from compared estimates and actual counts, the proportion of children under 12 to grown operatives appears as between 14 and 15 per cent, while in South Carolina it is at least 9 per cent.

The Associated Press reported the president of the Whitney mills as stating before the legislature that 30 per cent of his operatives were under 12 years, which percentage he says referred only to the spinning room, but that is startling enough. James K. Orr stated that 25 per cent of his machinery was run by children under 12 years. These cold percentages do not give an adequate expression of their meaning. To the horrified visitor the mills appear to be swarming with little children. The light and easy work of which the managers speak is to stand on their feet all day before a spinning frame, where the threads may break at one end or the other or in the middle at any moment, and when the thread breaks the spool stops and the thread is to be rejoined and the spool started again.

A baby has one frame to attend to, but most have two, many have three and some have four or five. The boys are generally doffers or sweepers, that is, they have to change the bobbins on the frames as they become full and substitute empty ones. In the exercise of their work they often run 16 or 17 miles a day with their trucks. The little sweeper plies a broom bigger than himself to perform these actions, trivial in themselves, uninterruptedly for 12 hours a day on the average, with only one-half hour for rest and food. We all remember how Lord Shaftesbury obtained powerful backing for his child labor law by inducing a gentleman in high place to repeat for 15 minutes the very action required of the child. At the end of that time he was willing to vote for anything to put a stop to such barbarity.

Without regulation of hours there is no reason to prevent the mills working at night and when they can do so profitably they avail themselves of this permission. I have talked with a little boy of seven years who worked for 40 nights, in Alabama, and another child not nine years old, who at six years old had been on the night shift 11 months.

A clerk in a cotton mill told me that little boys turned out at two in the morning for some trivial fault, afraid to go home, would beg him to allow them to go to sleep on the office floor.

In Georgia it is a common sight to see the children of cotton operatives stretched on the bed dressed as they came from the mills in the morning,

too weary to do anything but fling themselves down for rest.

In South Carolina Miss Jane Addams, of Chicago, found a child of five working at night in the fine, large, new mills. Only a few weeks ago I stood at 10:30 at night in a mill in Columbia, S. C., controlled and owned by northern capital, where children who did not know their own ages were working from 6 p. m. to 6 a. m. without a moment for rest or food or a single cessation of the maddening racket of the machinery, in an atmosphere unsanitary and clouded with humidity and lint.

Slaughter of Innocents.

The physical, mental and moral effect of these long hours of toil and confinement on the children is indescribably sad. Mill children are so stunted, that every foreman, as you enter the mill, will tell you that you cannot judge their ages. Children may look, he says, to be 10 or 11, and be in reality 14 or 15.

A horrible form of dropsy occurs among the children. A doctor in a city mill, who has made a special study of the subject, tells me that 10 per cent of the children who go to work before 12 years of age, after five years, contract active consumption. The lint forms in their lungs a perfect cultivating medium for tuberculosis, while the change from the hot atmosphere of the mill to the chill night or morning air, often brings on pneumonia, which frequently, if not the cause of death, is a forerunner of consumption.

How sternly the "pound of flesh" is insisted on by the various employers, is illustrated by the case of two little boys of 9 and 11, who had to walk three miles to work on the night shift for 12 hours. One night they were five minutes late and were shut out, having to tramp the whole three miles back again. The number of accidents to those poor little ones who do not know the dangers of machinery is, appalling.

In Huntsville, Ala., in January, just before I was there, a child of eight years who had been a few weeks in the mills, lost the index and middle fingers of her right hand. A child of seven had lost her thumb a year previously.

In one mill city in the South a doctor told a friend that he had personally amputated more than a hundred babies' fingers mangled in the mill. A cotton merchant in Atlanta told me he had frequently seen mill children without fingers or thumb and sometimes without the whole hand.

So frequent are these accidents that in some mills applicants for employment have to sign a contract that in case of injury in the mill the com-