Ada Nield

The Crewe Chronicle

1894

Original letters

We recommend that you print these letters out on A3 paper so that pupils in pairs are able to read the writing from Ada Nield's original letters to the Crewe Chronicle in 1894.

CREWE TOWN COUNCIL

CREWE

Rachel Hathaway Illustrations

Ada's 1st letter

The Crewe Chronicle

5th May 1894

Sir, — Will you grant me space in your sensible and widely read paper to complain of a great grievance of the class — that of tailoresses in some of the Crewe factories — to which I belong?

I have hoped against hope that some influential man (or woman) would take up our cause and put us in the right way to remedy — way to remedy for of course there is a way to remedy — for evils we are suffering from. But although one cannot open a newspaper without seeing what all sorts and conditions of men are constantly agitating for and slowly but surely obtaining — as in the miners' eight hour bill — only very vague mention is ever made of the under-paid, over-worked 'Factory Girl'. And I have come to the conclusion, sir, that as long as we are silent ourselves and apparently content with our lot, so long shall we be left in the enjoyment [?] of that lot.

The rates paid for the work done by us are so fearfully low as I had almost said keep body and to be totally inadequate to — I had almost said keep body and soul together. Well, sir, it is a fact which I could prove, if necessary, that we are compelled, not by our employers, but by stern necessity, in order to keep ourselves in independence, which self-respecting girls even in our class of life like to do, to work so many hours — I would rather not say how many — that life loses its savour, and our toil, which in moderation and at a fair rate of remuneration would be pleasurable, becomes drudgery of the most wearisome kind.

To take what may be considered a good week's wage the work has to be so close and unremitting that we cannot be said to 'live' — we merely exist. We eat, we sleep, we work, endlessly, ceaselessly work, from Monday morning till Saturday night, without remission. Cultivation of the mind? HOW is it possible? Reading? Those of us who are determined to live like human beings and require food for mind as well as body are obliged to take time which is necessary for sleep to gratify this desire. As for recreation and enjoying the beauties of nature, the seasons come and go, and we have barely time to notice whether it is spring or summer.

Certainly we have Sundays: but Sunday is to many of us after our week of slavery, a day of exhaustion. It has frequently been so in my case, and I am not delicate. This, you will understand, sir, is when work is plentiful. Of course we have slack times, of which the present is one (otherwise I should not have time to write to you). It may be said that we should utilise the slack times for recruiting our bodies and cultivating our minds. Many of us do so, as far as is possible in the anxious state we are necessarily in, knowing that we are not earning our 'keep' , for it is not possible, absolutely not possible, for the average ordinary 'hand to earn enough in busy seasons, even with the overtime I have mentioned, to make up for slack ones.

'A living wage!' Ours is a lingering, dying wage. Who reaps the benefit of our toil? I read sometimes of a different state of things in other factories, and if in others, why not those in Crewe? I have just read the report of the Royal Commission on Labour. Very good; but while Royal Commissions are enquiring and reporting and making suggestions, some of the workers are being hurried to their graves.

I am afraid I am trespassing a great deal on your space, sir, but my subject has such serious interest for me — I sometimes wax very warm as I sit stitching and thinking over our wrongs — that they, and the knowledge that your columns are always open to the needy, however humble, must be my excuse.

I am, sir, yours sincerely, A CREWE FACTORY GIRL

Editor's note: Our correspondent writes a most intelligent letter; and if she is a specimen of the factory girl, then Crewe factory proprietors should be proud of their 'hands'. We shall be glad to hear further from our correspondent as to the wages paid, the numbers of hours worked, and the conditions of their employment. Crewe Chronicle, 5 May 1894.

Ada's 2nd letter

The Crewe Chronicle

5th May 1894

A fortnight back we printed a neatly written and admirably expressed letter from ' A Crewe Factory Girl ', and we requested the writer to supply us with additional details about her work.

Sir, — In your issue of 5 May you were good enough to publish a letter of mine on the above subject, and also to invite me to write you further on our wages, hours of work, and conditions of employment. Before responding to the same I have waited in the hope that an abler pen than mine might take up my subject and say a word on our behalf. I conclude, however, that sufficient interest is not taken in factory girls and their wrongs outside their own sphere to call for any comment. Speaking for our-selves, sir, I can assure you that this question of prices paid for our work and the general inadequacy of the same in proportion to the work done is one naturally of keen interest, and forms the subject of constant discussion and complaint — entirely amongst ourselves, please take note, sir! Notwithstanding this general private discontent, we unfortunately as a body regard the existing state of things as inevitable, and have not sufficient courage, and do not know how if we had, to make a resolute stand against the injustice done us. I feel my position, sir, in this matter of giving information, to be one of peculiar difficulty. On the one hand, to be quite fair to myself and to those I am endeavouring to represent, I ought, and would like to describe fully and explicitly the exact kind of work done by us, the exact amount of it, and the exact price paid for that amount, and to give my own experience without reserve. But on the other hand, were I to do this I should be making revelations which would lead to instant recognition by many people of the particular factory in which I am employed, and probably also, sir, to the identification of your correspondent, which I shall do well to avoid. And therefore, on that account I feel reluctance to reveal them, greatly as I value this opportunity which you, sir, have so kindly given me of emphasising — for it must already be known — the fact that we are suffering from a great evil which stands in urgent need of redressing.

However, I think that even within the limits to which I shall have to restrict myself I can make good the statements contained in my first letter. I must explain before proceeding further that I shall speak of the branch of factory work known as 'finishing' only. I have reason to believe that the other branches [of female employment] are not overpaid, but I shall speak only of what I know to be actual fact. With regard to wages. We are paid not by the hour or day, but a certain sum per garment. Wages, then, vary greatly. For instance, many different classes of work have to be done, and different prices are paid, not at all, however, in proportion to the amount of work to be done, for while one price may yield us as much as 3d an hour (occasionally), another will not yield us 1 1/2d an hour (quite frequently), working equally hard for each sum. Of course, all classes of work have to be done, and we have to accept with gratitude (or otherwise) whatever sum someone — our employer presumably — thinks it right to give us. We are doing excellently when earning 3d an hour. We not infrequently work for 1 1/2d an hour. An average of about 2d for the average 'hand' may be taken as fair. Occasionally we may get work which will yield us as much as 4 1/2 d an hour, but it is so very occasional that it may be passed by in silence — otherwise, of course, we should have no cause for complaint.

And now to take an average of a year's wage of the 'average ordinary hand', which was the class I mentioned in my first letter, and being that which is in a majority may be taken as fairly representative. The wages of such a 'hand', sir, will barely average — but by exercise of the imagination — 8 shillings a week. I ought to say, too, that there is a minority, which is also considerable, whose wages will not average above 5 shillings a week. I would impress upon you that this is making the very best of the case, and is over rather than understating. What do you think of it, Mr. Editor, for a 'living' wage?

I wish some of those, whoever they may be who mete it out to us, would try to 'live' on it for a few weeks, as the factory girl has to do 52 weeks in a year. To pay board and lodging, to provide herself decent boots and clothes to stand all weathers, to pay an occasional doctor's bill, literature, and a holiday away from the scope of her daily drudging, for which even the factory girl has the audacity to long sometimes — but has quite as often to do without. Not to speak of provision for old age, when eyes have grown too dim to thread the everlasting needle, and to guide the worn fingers over the accustomed task. Yet this is a question which some of us, at least, ought to face, ignore it as we may, and are compelled to do. The census showing such a large preponderance of women over men in this country, it follows that the factory girl must inevitably contribute her quota to the ranks of old maidenism — be she never so willing to have it otherwise

And now as to the number of hours worked to earn — or rather to get — this magnificent sum. I explained in my first letter that we are subject to fluctuations as to the amount of work supplied us. In other words that we have busy seasons and slack ones. It follows, then, that in busy seasons, to total up to the yearly average I have given, we make good wages — and, of course, work a proportionately long number of hours — and in slack seasons bad wages.

Now, sir, our working day — that is, in the factory — consists of from 9 to 10 hours. Take out of this time (often considerable and unavoidably so) to obtain the work, to obtain the 'trimmings' and materials to do it with, and then to get it 'passed' and booked in to us when done, and then calculate how much — say we are getting 2d an hour — we shall be able to earn in an ordinary working day in the factory. It will be plain that in order to average this wage we have in busy seasons to work longer than the actual time in the factory.

Home-work, then, is the only resource of the poor slave who has the misfortune to adopt 'finishing' as a means of earning a livelihood. I have myself, repeatedly, five nights a week, besides Saturday afternoons, for weeks at a time, regularly taken four hours, at least, work home with me, and have done it. This, too, after a close hard day's work in the factory. In giving my own experience I give that of us all. We are obliged to do it, sir, to earn this living wage! It will be unnecessary to point out how fearfully exhausting and tedious it is to sit boring at the same thing for 14 or 15 hours at a stretch — meal times excepted of course.

But we are not asking for pity, sir, we ask for justice. Surely it would not be more than just to pay us at such a rate, that we could realise a living wage — in the true sense of the words — in a reasonable time, say one present working day of from 9 to 10 hours — till the eight hour day becomes general, and reaches even factory girls. Our work is necessary (presumably) to our employers. Were we not employed others would have to be, and if of the opposite sex, I venture to say, sir, would have to be paid on a very different scale. Why, because we are weak women, without pluck and grit enough to stand up for our rights, should we be ground down to this miserable wage?

With regard to the conditions of our employment, those of which I can speak leave nothing to be desired. In the particular factory in which I am employed, we work in greatest freedom and comfort, and I should like to add, that as far as I personally am concerned, from those in immediate authority over me I have never received anything but consideration and courtesy.

In conclusion, sir, I am aware that in writing these letters to you I am probably doing what I was reading of the other day, namely, 'butting my head against a stone wall'; but, as the writer I am quoting went on to say, 'How can one be sure it is a stone wall, or one made only of paper, unless one does butt one's head against it?' Now I am not quite sanguine enough to think that the wall against which I am butting my head will give way at least with my solitary 'butt'. Nevertheless, sir, I am determined to butt my head against it. Indeed, I feel it to be personally degrading and a disgrace upon me to remain silent and submit without a protest to the injustice done me.

And if the wall is of stone, sir, and the only remedy lies in the radical one recommended by the minority report of the Labour Commission, then will you allow me to urge upon your readers, upon those of my own sex who though not yet having the privilege of voting themselves, yet have influence with those who have, to use that influence intelligently, in the right direction? And to those of the opposite sex who do enjoy this privilege, to send only those men to Parliament, of whatever political creed, who stand pledged to do all in their power, with the utmost possible speed, to relieve the burden of the oppressed and suffering workers of this country, not least amongst whom are the factory girls of Crewe.

Ada's 3rd letter

The Crewe Chronicle

5th June 1894

I make my bow to the readers of the Chronicle, and beg to reintroduce myself as the 'Crewe Factory Girl' who has on two former occasions drawn their attention to the 'living wage' which she and her fellow-workers are at present enjoying.

I ask them now, first, to make acquaintance with factory girls themselves, as the writer, who is one of them, knows them to be. Secondly, I ask them to come with me (in imagination) through the factory doors, and view for themselves the life the factory girl therein. It has on several occasions been the privilege (?) of the writer to see visitors of high degree conducted by the manager through the ranks of the workers in the factory of which she writes, all admiring evidently the apparent comfort and happiness of these factory girls. The writer has wondered on such occasions if the visitors' opinions would have differed had they known the internal working of this phase of life on which they were looking as it is known to those who live the life. The visitors are shown some of the work done by these rows of women and girls. Are they informed of the price paid for it? No doubt a week's wage of one of these girls is quoted to them (l have of course no proof of this) but not, I venture to say, Of the 'average ordinary' hands of which I have spoken exclusively hitherto, but of experts, of what I can best describe as the 'clique', known amongst ourselves as the 'favourites' (I hope to explain that fully). Are they informed of the hours worked to obtain that sum? These visitors look only on the outside of things, from the employers' point of view. A band of happy girls, apparently working in greatest ease, whose comfort is the careful consideration of their employer. Now these visitors are only those of the employers, and are only a privileged few. The factory doors are closed on the general public, who know nothing of what takes place therein. But l, the factory girl, throw wide these doors. I invite the public, one and all, to come with me as my visitors, I will give them not the superficial view which the manager's visitors get, but a thorough good look into everything, from the factory girl's point of view. Thank God for the public press, which sheds its strong white light on all the dark corners of the earth! Like John Ploughman (pen name of another correspondent), I am thankful, too, that we have a good local paper in the Chronicle, which fearlessly publishes the opinions, however varying, of all classes of thinkers; and lends its powerful aid as willingly to the weary factory girl as to the peer of the realm.

When my readers have accompanied me and seen things for themselves, I am confident that my opinion will be theirs, namely that the condition of the factory girls is bad in nearly every particular, and really needs the helping hand of the Radical reformer. I unhesitatingly and emphatically affirm that the influence of her life on the factory girl is demoralising and debasing, and downward in its every tendency. And this, before I have finished, I will prove. I am aware that I cannot do so without revealing the identity of the factory of which I speak. I do not fear. What I have said so far has been proved to be irrefutable — surely receiving no contradiction may be taken as proof — and what I have said with regard to wages, especially, will apply to at least one other factory in Crewe (I know it to be a fact). And what I have to say now is only what these eyes and ears have seen and heard, so that I do not need to fear the consequences. When my readers and I have had a look into things, I will respectfully submit some ideas of my own for the improvement of the condition of my class. When I have finished, I hope that Mr. Editor and any of my readers will criticise my notions, and suggest any of their own which may prove to be better than mine. I shall not have space to-day to do more than make an introductory and explanatory sketch of the factory girl herself. That visit to the factory must be reserved till next week. I promise that it shall be an accurate, faithful and thorough one. All the dark places shall be made light.

Now we factory girls are aware of the public opinion of us. That we are regarded as quite the lowest class of female workers. As a noisy, cheeky, idle, ignorant, shallow class of girls. I do not wish to obtrude myself unnecessarily, but a little personal experience here in explanation and proof of the assertion I have just made may not be out of place. It is a fact, then, that I have myself, on more than one occasion, heard my class spoken of, and by those whose opinions I have valued, in such terms of contemptuous scorn, of such sneering sarcasm — milder language will not express my meaning — that the blood in my veins has boiled with indignation. I resolved, whenever opportunity served, or to make such opportunity for myself when possible, that I would vindicate, with all the energy and power of conviction which intimate knowledge of the subject, and experience of the kind I have just quoted may be calculated to give me, the social position and general character of the class to which I am not ashamed to belong. There is no better way of doing this than by showing the life she lives, which tends to make the factory girl what she seems to be, and in a measure is.

As to her social position — improve these same conditions of her life and I venture to say that the factory girl will rise in the social status in the same degree — I admit that we have faults. I admit that we are essentially a noisy class of girls. I use the term 'essentially' advisedly, because I intend to prove in that visit to the factory next week, that on certain occasions it actually is essential to be noisy, if we must obtain a wage of any kind, whether 'living' or 'dying'. Unfortunately, however, but not unnaturally, our noisy propensities do not end when the necessity for them ends, and we are noisy everywhere — we sit at work, in our general progress about the factory, and even outside, for we rush through the doors like a pack of wild Indians, hustling and jostling, and yelling and hooting at each other, and generally annoying everybody who comes in contact with us.

It is quite true, also, that we are an exceedingly 'cheeky' class of girls. But 'cheek' too, I shall show next week, is a necessary qualification for the obtaining of that living wage which we enjoy. It is well known amongst ourselves that to be at all shy is fatal to success in the particular line of life of which we are the ornaments. It is an interesting study to some of us when a somewhat quiet, shy girl enters our arena, to watch her gradual development into one of ourselves — as we are obliged to be. The writer is an example of the kind. She, however, has learnt the inevitable lesson — by painful degrees! — and is now well-known amongst her cheeky comrades as one able to hold her own.

I flatly deny that we are idle. There are exceptions, of course, but as a class we are hard-working and industrious. Anybody who carefully followed me through my second letter will understand that the factory girl absolutely must work. I shall not attempt to defend us against the charge of ignorance. To take an intelligent public through the factory as I propose to do, and show them that we meekly suffer oppression of all kinds without even a wish to alter things; and even show a spirit of resentment against any attempt at change for the better; and then to pretend that we are not ignorant would be an absurdity. Ignorance is no crime, however, and we shall improve. I shall have to admit that we are shallow, too. And we always shall be shallow as long as we are voracious readers of 'penny dreadfuls'. I can hardly contain myself when speaking of those awful 'novelettes' — I see such fearful effects of their baneful influence — in place of reading of a broader, more substantial kind; and in our hours of leisure parade the streets in gangs (please excuse the word, I cannot just think of one of a more polite kind), talking empty twaddle with the equally silly of the opposite sex, instead of taking a lively interest in the doings of our fellow-men and women in the great world around us, and ourselves taking a part, however humble, therein.

Well, we have virtues too. And I think when the public have been with me next week, they will agree with me chat it is a wonder that we have. It is terribly hard to be good in a factory. Indeed, the grinding of the mill is so acute and never-ceasing that I am afraid some of us have given up trying to behave like Christians. I have myself wondered often, like John Ploughman, what the next life would be like after the training we are receiving here. Yet there are many evidences of generous impulse and self-sacrifice shown daily amongst these factory girls which go far to prove what I am persuaded is true — namely, that if the condition of the factory girl's life were improved, she herself would improve. The writer, in her experience of factory life, has met with many such instances, and owes a debt of gratitude to some of her fellow-workers which she can never repay. I have now introduced the factory girl; next week, if I possibly can —certainly as soon as I can, I will ask my readers to accompany her to work.

Ada's 4th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

23rd June 1894

To-day something special happens. I not only plod to the factory myself, but I take a whole army of Chronicle readers with me. To-day the doors swing wide to admit them as well as me. Imagine yourselves therefore, my readers, within a certain factory in Crewe. Some of you will know it before your visit has ended.

Please remember that we are in the 'finishing' department, for while many of my remarks and much of my information will apply to life in a factory in all its departments (of female employment) it is in the finishing department where my life is spent, and naturally it is here where I bring my visitors. With the room itself we are not concerned. As I have implied before, it is a comfortable room, light, clean, and commodious. It is the life lived in this room with which we have to do. I have explained to you before that as 'hands' we factory girls are of several grades. There are the average ordinary hands who, while able to do work of nearly every kind, chiefly take what is known as 'best' work. Do not mistake me. I mean best work, not best paid. There are hands below the average called 'common' hands; these take 'common' work. That is work not requiring much skill. The price paid for it otherwise yields the finisher quite as much as that paid to best hands for best work.

But these are not quite all the hands, dear readers. There are a few more, and with these I want to make you specially acquainted. These are the 'favourites'. What kind of girls are they as a rule? As a rule they are not girls at all, but married women. In one or two cases at least married women with husbands in full employment; in one case in particular, reputed to have private means. I am not concerned with that fact, if it be a fact; but in making a faithful representation I am bound to notice it, because you will understand that the knowledge of it exerts an influence — and that not for good — on the life of the girls who have to compete — if competition it can be called where favour is shown, and that all on one side — with this woman in the struggle for daily bread. In one or two cases at least these women are grandmothers. Amongst these favourites are a few girls — or unmarried women, to be quite correct — who are experts; who take absolutely the best kinds of work, that is, the work requiring most skill. Now that you have an idea of us 'hands', look at a certain spot in this room where a table or kind of counter is situated. Behind this counter two gentlemen stand, whose business it is to 'pass' our work, to give us work to do, to see that we do it, to book it 'out' and 'in' to us, to bring it back to us from other men, who pass it after it has been pressed, for any alterations, and to look after us generally (these gentlemen often appeal to us for sympathy in their hard task). I shall want you to accompany me to my side of that counter presently, and I shall detain you there longer than at any other spot in the room; for it is there that the factory girl struggles for daily bread; where all that is bad in her nature is brought out and fostered; where lessons are taught and practices prevail which make upright, honest, honourable dealing between factory girl and factory girl, between woman and woman, and comrades, an impossibility. Let me now explain two rules which are sometimes supposed to obtain amongst us. One is that we shall pass our work (which has been finished the previous day or brought with us from home) in turn as we arrive at the doors in the morning. To understand that you must know that the doors are opened to us ten minutes before 8 o'clock (the hour we begin work), and those of us who choose to come early and to stand waiting outside the doors get the first chance pass when we get in. Our first business then, if we do not see a comrade on the way immediately preceding us, on arriving at the door is to enquire who arrived last, and to follow that one in passing.

There are a few enterprising girls, and also married women, who make a point of arriving at the doors not later than 7.40, and sometimes as early as 7.25, and these, of course, pass first every day.

To make you understand the full importance of this rule must explain the other. When this work is passed it is booked in to us, and the other rule is that we shall get more work out in' rotation as we have passed. This rule of coming early to the door is not so closely observed when we are doing work of steady, even-paying (mind I do not say adequate) kind. I remember one time when an order was being executed, which was acknowledged by all to yield us better 'pay' than anything else we get, and which only comes our way occasionally. Only certain amount of it — not enough for us all — came each day for us to do, and you can imagine that while that order lasted we were most of us early risers. I remember some very keen competition amongst us at that time. I myself formed one of a number of about forty round the doors at 7.35. I daresay you would do the same, dear reader, if by so doing you could get a chance to really get what you earned for once in a way— to get as much in two hours as you otherwise would get in four.

Please take in consideration the fact that these rules do not exist for all of us — not for the favourites, for instance, who a rule, are exempt from them — and are entirely at the discretion of the two aforementioned gentlemen to rigorously enforce; to relax; or to ignore altogether, as they may see fit Now that you are getting acquainted with some of the conditions of our life, come with me to this counter and share with me what I find there. Let us first suppose it to be a tolerably busy season.

Our struggles now at this table will not be very fierce. We shall probably have one garment ready to 'pass', shall have' another or more 'out' to be doing, and of course we shall be able to take our turn for another. Let us take our work, and occupy any vacant place we may see, and wait our turn to pass. All that we shall have to do now will be to look sharply after our turn, and insist on passing in that turn. Should we be at all lax in this respect we might have to stay here all day, for our turn will be frequently disputed, and if the disputant is one of ourselves (not of the clique) it is a match between us, and the one with the most 'cheek' wins.

I have seen girls of a meek, submissive nature stand waiting here to pass for hours at a time — and some even a whole day. Should our disputant be a favourite, however, it is an extremely 'cheeky' one amongst us who undertakes to combat — most of us know the utter futility of entering the lists against one of these.

When we have passed we shall have to look closely after our turn again in getting work out, and shall only have to see all the — which pay best — whether of the best specially good 'jobs' or common class, given entirely to the favourites, while we, the rank and file, take whatever is left for us — and are duly grateful for the favour shown us.

Our life now (in a busy season) will be spent chiefly in work. Are you prepared, my reader, to come and work hard with us 9 hours in the factory , and then to come home with us and begin again, and sew till you can sew no longer, from sheer fatigue — such fatigue as some of you, I hope have not felt — and then to rise early again with some of us and do a little more before it is time to wend our way back for another day of it. This is no fanciful picture; nor does it refer peculiarly to myself; there are girls here in your midst who know by bitter experience whether that account is a faithful one. And the employers know it too, deny it as they may.

And now let us take the slack season. I think I shall be quite within the mark if I say that it exists more or less for half the year, so that you will see that we are bound to consider it fully. Come with me now to this counter. These rules we have considered will not be of much use now, because it is extremely probable that we shall have nothing to pass, and therefore cannot take turns to get work. As we may have to stay some time at this counter we shall provide ourselves with some knitting, crocheting, or a 'novelette' to read, to wile away the tedium of waiting. If we have not been wary, and taken the precaution to secure an early seat, the probability is that we shall not find a front seat vacant, and as you will find it very necessary that we should have a front seat, we shall watch our opportunity, and on its occurring, at once seize it. Perhaps you are mystified at our having a 'seat' at this counter. Well; my reader, we may have to wait here half a day, and the probability is that you, as well as the factory girl, will grow tired of standing; and much as I regret having nothing more elegant in the way of a seat to offer visitors, when this opportunity for which we are watching occurs, I shall be obliged to ask you to jump — I am afraid you will have to jump, for it is a pretty high counter — up with me on our side of this counter.

We shall not be the only girls there! Don't feel ashamed of sitting perched up in a row like — rabbits in the market. That feeling will wear off with a little practice. Well, we are sitting on this table. We shall not have much room to move our limbs as our comrades are wedging us in on each side and in front, and I daresay we shall get a little cramped, but we shall be able to watch what is going on, nevertheless. At any rate we must not dismount, or the place we have just secured with such difficulty may be lost, and we should have to begin over again. You will understand that it is the ordinary and common hands which are gathered round this table; the favourites will not be under the necessity of making themselves seen and heard in order to get served.

I fear after all that we shall not be able to finish our visit to. day, because I want to go fully into what takes place at this table in slack seasons, and there are also several other things about our life in this factory which I want to show you, so that I am afraid I shall either have to keep you waiting on that table till next week, or if you object to that, shall have to beg you to pay me another visit. I have not shown you the most important things yet, nor said half that I wish to say. The doors will be open next week, and the factory girl in attendance, if you will be so good as to come again.

Ada's 5th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

23rd June 1894

Sir — Please allow me to reply briefly to ‘One Competent to Advise’, who writes in this week’s Chronicle. With his advice I am not content.

I have no doubt that parents and friends of working girls will value it for what it is worth. It is the statements and insinuations contained in the letter which may be calculated to mislead the uninitiated to which I feel it my duty to reply. This gentleman compels me to again emphatically assert that this ‘movement’ has originated with myself alone. I repeat that I alone am responsible for originating this ‘controversy’, and no ‘portion’ of workers at all, skilled or otherwise. It is odious to me to have to keep thrusting myself constantly before the public, but in self-defence I am obliged to do so. Be it known to this gentleman and the public then, that I, the originator of this controversy, though not on any account claiming to be an expert, am yet an average hand , and am able 10 do and take work requiring skill; and any alterations in my work are the exceptions, not the rule. As to the experience required to understand the conditions of the trade, l, the originator, being what I profess to be, a factory girl, am not yet old enough to lay claim to the experience this gentleman considers necessary. I think, however, that Chronicle readers will agree with me that a lifetime’s experience may not be necessary to enable people to understand whether they are getting honest value for honest work. As this gentleman says, it is best known to ourselves why we are unable or unwilling to earn a decent living; and I think those who read my article on factory life in to-day’s Chronicle will also get an idea of the reason, At any rate, by the time I have finished with this subject they will, I hope, understand as well as those who ‘best know themselves’.

I should like to say also that I think this gentleman will find that when these things are understood a little better by those whom they concern most that it will be chiefly the more skilled portion of the workers who will be found in sympathy with any effort at combination. One statement made by this gentleman is very misleading: that quick and well-trained girls in times ‘of full employment earn from 18 shillings to 21 shillings per week. I defy him to prove it only in very exceptional and occasional cases, which it is not fair to take into consideration in dealing, as I am, with my class in its entirety. And if this sum is by chance earned sometimes, the reason why is no doubt ‘best known’ to this gentleman. With the remainder of his letter I shall probably deal in due course at a later stage of this ‘controversy’. Thanking you for space, I remain, sir, yours sincerely,

A Crewe Factory Girl

Ada's 6th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

30th June 1894

My readers will remember that we are considering the slack season, and are sitting on the table in very close quarters.

While we wait and at the same time keep a close watch for the supplies of work which will arrive at intervals from the machinists — while we wait, I say, let me have a little conversation with you. Now we, who are sitting on this table, are the ordinary hands, and are probably capable, good workers, able to do any kind of work which may come. It is very probable that we have had nothing to do for hours. Let me talk plainly, and say that it is quite possible that we have been idle the whole of yesterday, and have to look on the possibility of to-day being a repetition. Some of us are girls who live in lodgings; some of us at home, and may have fathers and brothers who, for reasons which need not be discussed, may be unable to keep us, or, I take it, we should not be here. It is a plain, hard fact that the week is passing; and it is another fact that if we do not get something to do soon, when pay day comes we shall find unable to pay up. Now I submit to you, and I maintain it whether you agree with me or not, that we girls, whether we live in lodgings or live at home, have a wish, at least, to be honest and independent, and are just as anxious to get any work which may come, as any of the 'favourites', whether they be married women, widows, or experts who as 'hands' are of value to the employer. That is as it presents itself to us, as we sit on this table waiting for work. But we know for a fact, that the more respectable we appear to be, the less noise we make, the less we parade our private affairs, the less chance we have of getting anything to do. I ask you is that knowledge calculated to elevate or debase?

Some work is coming, however, as is evident by the commotion roun4 the table, and the arrival in our midst of the favourites, who very probably were in their places doing work which they already have. Now the work has arrived, get as far on the table as you can — if you do not someone else will — and being a natural human being, ask, as everybody else is asking, for a share. While you try, adducing particular, and, to yourself, convincing reasons why you in particular should be the favoured one, watch it handed over your head to someone far behind, nearly out of sight, who had not even had the need to speak. Do you feel like the typical gentle English girl now, my reader? I ask you is it calculated to call forth and nurture the attributes of pure womanhood, first, to sit where we are sitting; and secondly to sit here hours and see this done time after time? I have seen a favourite who had as many as three garments out come up and get served before girls who sat here waiting and watching, and whose turn it was had justice been done. It is only fair to say, too, that I sat here and saw and heard that countenanced by those in supreme authority.

Do not suppose that we see it done without protest. We spend our time on this table in one long protest. Sometimes those gentlemen and ourselves are not very polite towards each other. While we are waiting for another supply of work let me add another word. I told you last week that the favourites are of various kinds. Amongst them are widows who have children to maintain, and women who have sick husbands, and other pitiable cases which I could mention. Now I have spent hours on this table, and I say to you that never do I remember one complaint made, one protest uttered, or one word of any kind said by these anxious and capable girls who sit here waiting for work, when such work is given to any of these women whom I have just mentioned. I unhesitatingly declare that if the choice were given us we would prefer to suffer ourselves rather than take work out of the hands of these, who need it so badly. It is only when favourites who are in good circumstances who come to this table and get served two or three times before we get served once, that we raise our voices in protest. I have seen it all; have felt it all; have thought a great deal about it all; and I say to you that with such influences I cannot see how we can be angelic and good-tempered.

But another supply of work is coming. Let us now. Suppose that the favourites are pretty well supplied; that is not often the case, however. Now my reader, let us gird on our armour of 'cheek', and prepare for battle. All our comrades are doing likewise. When the work arrives — before it arrives — let us shout for it, beg for it in as loud a voice as we can; above all let us make ourselves as noticeable as possible , and be as persistent as possible, as then we may get served to 'get out of one row'. If we sit still, never speaking, or speak in a quiet voice, we never shall be heard or noticed, and consequently never shall get served. Sometimes the clamour made by the girls begging and fighting against each other for daily bread, not pocket money, can be heard in all parts of the factory. When the season was very slack indeed I have seen the youngest hands literally fight and scramble for garments, for which 2d is paid. Imagine the scene, my reader! A table with at least 50 girls on and round it. Lay a dozen garments, probably not worth more than 7 shillings in all to us.

These girls all clamouring, with arms outstretched, for a share of it, say a shilling's worth, for which when they have it they will have to do at least one and six' worth of work. Do not laugh. My heart swells now as I write and think of those scenes, as it has done many times when I have been an actor therein. I say to you with all the energy and emphasis which I can convey, that you are not men, you are not women in the true sense of the words; you are not true to your manhood, to your womanhood, if you can look on such scenes as these without a wish — without a manly and womanly determination — to find some way of altering things.

Before we leave this table let me say a few more words. Think over what I have told you. Don't you see how in the existing state of things it is impossible for us to act quite fairly and honourably towards each other? We have to take advantage of each other, as it were. Can you wonder that girls, not only in slack seasons but in busy ones,_ and the intermediate ones which are neither busy nor slack, take advantage of any accident which may arise which enables them to get served out of their turn or a second time before others who they know have not been served once? It will thus happen sometimes that one girl, through a series of accidents, will make a good week's wage; and another, equally capable, may get next to nothing. Did we stick to all that is perfectly upright and honourable, one half of our time, we should not get a third of a living, to say nothing of half. Does that tend to elevate or demoralise? I think now that we may leave the table. Suppose we walk about a little to ease our cramped limbs, while I tell you of other things pertaining to our life here. Out of any price paid for any garment-we have to find all the materials required, such us thread, silk, twist (for buttonholes), needles, wax. I will quote one week's wage in a busy season. I earned 14 shillings. I worked at least 14 hours a day for five days and about 12 on Saturday for that sum, and out of it I had to pay 1s 1d for materials.

One reason why common work in so many cases pays the finisher as well or better than best work is that the materials required are not so costly. We get these materials at the office window at one certain time in the forenoon, and another in the afternoon, only. If we are not gifted with foresight or are not of a provident disposition, what we require in the meantime is borrowed from a good-natured comrade. When getting these materials, we of course always have to take the money. I remember one time when an order was being completed which required a peculiar colour of silk, which cannot be used for any other colour of garment. While the order had been in progress the silk had been sold to us in skeins — two for 2 1/2d I think it was — and we were not allowed to use any other kind of silk, Just before the order was completed, however, this silk gave out, and for some reason — which was not explained to us — no more was obtained; and we were compelled to buy reels of machine silk at 1s 8d a reel. We naturally arranged amongst ourselves to divide a reel between two or four of us, as the case might be. But I submit to you that we were not treated quite fairly in being obliged to buy even five-pence worth of silk out of one week's wage in order to finish about two garments. . . .

I am open to conviction in this; but I think also that when a certain time for supplying these materials is fixed, and girls stand at the window waiting to be served, they should hardly be kept waiting six minutes or longer while the young ladies who would serve them are finishing whatever they are doing. This is not a frequent occurrence, but I think it should not occur at all. When we whose time is of such value (when we have work to do) to us are kept frittering that time away here, it does not influence us for good in anyway, unless by cultivating the virtue of patience. I have myself, on more than one occasion, after waiting five or six minutes, deliberately left the window and gone again before the hour has expired, to see if it would then be convenient to attend to my wants.

Another item I want to mention to you. Every Monday morning a boy comes round with a bag and a tray of numbered checks. We each are compelled to buy one of these checks the one on which our number is inscribed. Some cost two pence, some three-pence. If we pay two-pence, we have the inestimable privilege of a seat in the tea-room and a mug of tea every afternoon. If we pay three-pence, we have, in addition, the privilege of some hot water at lunch- or dinnertime. Now, there are a number of us who never take this tea. I am one of them. We thus pay two-pence for simply nothing at all. Personally I have two reasons for not drinking the tea. First because I do not like it, secondly because I do not consider that I need it, and I object either to drink tea which I do not like, or to drink tea which I do not consider that I need, and I object also to pay for what I never get. I ought to say that during my experience no attempt has ever been made either by myself or others to get this rule relaxed at all. But you will not be surprised at that when I tell you that I have myself seen girls get their work 'stopped' (that is, none is to be given to them for a stated period) for raising objections or for refusing to pay in very slack times, or when they may have been 'out' (away from work) for any portion of the week. I hope to revert to this matter of tea-money next week.

Another slight item in our life. Those of us who for any reason, laziness or otherwise, do not manage to arrive before the doors are locked, are allowed to come in at half-past-eight or nine o'clock on payment of a penny. I understand that this line is added to the funds of a sick club which exists. Another small matter and then I must reluctantly take leave of you. Our week is reckoned from Wednesday to Wednesday. On Thursday morning a boy comes round to inscribe in a book the sums to which we are entitled. We sometimes have quite a variety of small sums ranging from a half-pence to 1s 6d to reckon, and you will not be surprised to hear that we make a mistake occasionally. Should we do so, however, a rule has recently been established which compels us to wait a day longer for our money. Thus, we who are in disgrace shall have to wait till Saturday, instead of getting paid on Friday, like our comrades. I have never experienced this myself, but I have seen and warmly sympathised with my fellow-workers who have. I remember at least one case quite recently, only the other week, when it transpired that a girl actually had made, no mistake; but for some reason not clear to us the young lady who manages these things for us did not see fit to pay the girl till Saturday. You will understand that while this is not a matter of vital importance, yet it causes inconvenience, and is not looked on by us with favourable eyes.

I must now thank you earnestly for your visit and attention. I hope to address Mr. Editor and yourselves next week on this subject generally, and to submit to your judgement some suggestions for the improvement of the condition of the factory girls. In conclusion, may I say that if you are not clear on any point, if there is anything else about our life that you would like to know, or any question you would like to ask, if you will address me through the Editor in the columns of the Chronicle, I shall be happy to enlighten you on anything I know.

Ada's 7th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

14th July 1894

I propose today to sum up, review and comment on further where necessary, what I have already said on the above subject, and to submit the only practicable form of remedy from the evils from which we suffer which presents itself to me.

Before proceeding to do this may I say that I have in my mind an ideal of what life in a factory could and might be, but I am bound to confess that at present my ideal, though not fanciful, is yet impracticable and somewhat beside the point, and therefore for the present useless. Perhaps at some future time, if you, sir, will so far indulge me, I may sketch out my ideal and the means of its realisation in your columns. Now for my summary.

First — I began by showing you that we are not paid fair — in short, value for the great bulk of the work done by us, in short that we find it utterly impossible to realise a Living Wage. I wish to return to this point presently, for herein I recognise the root of all the evils from which we suffer; and in my opinion no substantial benefit could accrue to us — indeed, until this root is plucked up and destroyed, I do not see how any practical reforms in any other direction can be attempted for the evils of other kinds which exist in a great measure originate in, and are part and parcel of that root, and it were therefore almost impossible to attack the one without the other — in destroying the root we shall necessarily affect its offspring, which if not resulting in the like destruction of the offspring, will at any rate render the ultimate destruction of such easier of accomplishment.

Second — I tried to show you that we are unable to live rational human lives — that one half of our time we live the 'life of a slave or beast of burden, and the other half a comparatively idle, dependent life. This is a result of the root of all the evils, and I do not see how we can attempt to alter it till we pluck up the root.

Third — I next, as well as I was able, made a sketch of the factory girl herself as I know her to be; and tried to show that many of the faults of which she is accused are the natural result of the influences of her life. That point we may now leave, I think.

Fourth — That an evil of 'favouritism' exists to a fearful degree amongst us, not only in the factory in which I work, but at least one other factory in Crewe, as I know for a fact.

Fifth — That married women are admitted into our arena. On that l will speak further.

Sixth — That the present system — or rather lack of system — in dealing out such work as there is, is unjust and unfair one. This to a great degree is a result of the root of the evils, and in attacking and destroying the root we shall probably destroy this evil also.

Seventh — That materials for the due performance of our work are bought by us out of our living wage. I have comments to make on this presently.

Eighth — That the sum of two-pence per week or 8s 6d per year is extracted from us, in some cases, for absolutely no return at all. On that, too, I have further comments to make.
Ninth — Minor oppressions of various kinds I have shown you which are easily traceable to the root and will probably cease to exist when the root is destroyed — at any rate if we can destroy the root we shall have a chance with these.

To sum up then in a very few words: The general conditions of our life from wages downwards are bad — rotten throughout. This is a summary of the account with which I have from time to time supplied you, and as it has never in the slightest degree been contradicted, I take it that it stands proved a faithful account. That being so, I think you will agree with me that reforms are badly and urgently needed. Let me now comment on some of the points which I have just enumerated, and suggest what means of improvement I can wherever possible.

With your permission, sir, I will leave the first and most important point — the root of the evils, till the last, and will begin with the fourth — 'favouritism'. This is a very real evil, and I say should not exist at all, It is a pernicious, debasing practice, alike to the favoured and the unfavoured. It fosters the bad in the nature of the favoured one, for if she be already of an unhealthy disposition it adds to and makes worse what already exists; and if she be of a naturally healthy disposition, it also debases, for she knows and feels that in a manner she is robbing others of their rights, and this can never be satisfactory or influence for good, a girl of good heart. Of its effects on the unfavoured it is needless to speak. I say then that this practice of making favourites should in the best interests of all be entirely done away with. It may be said that this would be unfair, in that the good workers would be placed on a level with the bad, I say, no. The favourites are in many cases by no means the best workers. Skill and execution are not necessary qualifications for the rank of 'favourite'. Then place all on an equal footing, so that we can first respect ourselves, and secondly can respect our fellow workers. I say without hesitation that the good workers would soon be found in their proper position viz. the front ranks, not because they are ' favoured' — a degrading thought! — but because by their abilities they merit that position. As it is, no encouragement is given to girls who have [a] sense of honour to excel in their work, and this can only have a lowering effect. The only way of bringing about a change in this respect is the one I shall presently propose as a means of attempting the destruction of the root of the evil.

Point 5. Married Women. These chiefly constitute the 'favourites'. Now I think it unjust that women who have husbands working should be allowed to come, and in a manner take their means of subsistence from girls who are dependent for a livelihood on their earnings. Without going into the obvious neglect of these wives and mothers of other duties and solemn responsibilities — and how much might be said on the evils arising from that not only to themselves and families, but in an indirect manner to the community at large! — which in case might be considered somewhat personal, it is manifestly unfair that married women in receipt of a husband's wages, for no valid reason, should be allowed to come and in .some cases actually take precedence of girls who in many cases exceed them in ability and capability. You will understand, sir, that I am here not necessarily referring peculiarly to myself. What, then, shall we say about them?' I do not say 'Make a clean sweep of them!' — though I confess to a leaning that way — even if we had power, because conscience tells me that we in turn should be a little unfair. But I do say this, and will maintain it in face of any opposition — Place them side by side with these girls in fair, open, above-board competition; give them an equal chance with these girls and no more. And only way to effect this that I can see is the same which I shall propose for the plucking up of the root.

Point 7. The system of selling us materials. Now I say that as we are compelled to buy these materials, we have an undeniable right to know the exact, original cost of such, and any percentage which may be allowed on the wholesale buying of the same is ours by right, and ours only. In my opinion anyone who buys these materials for us and not only does not sell them to us at cost price but who also does not give us the full benefit of any and all reductions, is robbing us, neither more nor less. Now I do not say, sir, that anybody is doing this, but I do say that we have no certain knowledge to the contrary. And I say that we ought to have — that it should be made perfectly clear to us that we are getting full value for the hard-earned money we pay. This might be done without much trouble by posting up in a conspicuous place the bills for these materials, so that we could see for ourselves that we are paying only what is just and right. If we are, there can be no objection to this suggestion.

Point 8. The tea-money. Out of this money a tea-woman is paid, I understand, 18 shillings a week. How many factory hands earn that? Does the work done by them not require so much skill? Gas has to be provided, and of course the tea, sugar and milk. I do not know the exact number of hands employed in this factory, but I believe it is upward of 400 girls, and something like 100 men and boys, who also pay two-pence a week for their tea. Now, sir, we all pay two-pence a week, and those of us (a considerable number) who also require hot water at lunch or dinner pay an additional penny. Does it take the whole of the tax levied on us for the providing of these things? I personally — quite recently and quite voluntarily — have been solemnly assured that it does. Let us now consider those who pay this two-pence who do not take the tea. Suppose we allow for the moment that the assertion just quoted be true. It is clear that the tea for which we pay, if made at all, as we are now supposing, is either consumed by others, or is thrown away. Now is it fair, just or in any sense right that we should be obliged to pay for tea for others to drink, or to pay for tea to be wasted?

And now we will suppose that the tea for which we pay, but never take, is never made, which is far the most likely and reasonable supposition. Where, then, do our contributions go? Whom do they benefit? Have we not a right to know?

I consider that if somebody obliges me to pay 8s 6d a year , that somebody is equally obliged to not only show me what equivalent for the same he may consider I get, but to give me some equivalent which I myself can appreciate substantially. In short, sir, I do consider, have always considered, and shall always consider, so long as we continue to pay it, that I and others are being robbed of two-pence every Monday morning. And now as to those who pay the two-pence and drink the tea. I do not consider these fairly treated, and neither do they. I say in this case, as I said of the materials, that if we are obliged to pay this money nobody has a fraction of right to one farthing over what it costs to provide us with the tea. And, here again, I make no assertion that anybody is making any profit out of our money. Still, here again, we are not clear that it is otherwise. And we ought to be clear. The suggestion made in the other case will do equally well here; an exact account of the income and expenditure might from time to time be posted up where we can see it. I can see no possible objection to this. If those who manage for us have a right to get this money from us, nobody will deny that we have an equal right to know for ourselves, to our own satisfaction, exactly how our money goes.

But I do not recognise the right of the employer, or those who represent the employer; to demand this money from us at All, I say that we should have liberty to say whether we will have tea or not. It is a custom, I know, in some factories, simply to provide hot water at a charge of half-pence per week (and we pay a penny for exactly the same luxury — why?). This seems quite fair to me, and I do not see why it might not be applied in the factory about which I speak.

And now, sir, to come to the root. This living wage of ours! I intended, and would have liked to have spoken on this at some length, to have traced it to its origin, its subsequent growth as affecting all branches of the trade, and other trades as well, but have already said so much, and so much still remains that is important to say, that I think to make myself sufficiently clear, I must confine my remarks to the factory in which I work. In doing so I shall probably answer my purpose quite as well, and you, sir, and your readers, will easily apply what I shall say to whatever else it may fit for yourselves. Now the work done in this tory not of the civilian class. It is chiefly Government work — orders for army and police clothing. Railway orders also, but those are recognised by us as being generally of a better paying class than those of the Government. Now I wonder if the Government of this country know (or care) that those on whom the real business of executing their orders falls are 'sweated' thereby? And is the Government so frightfully poor that it cannot afford to pay a living wage to those who make the clothing of our soldiers and policemen? I have told you before that one class of garment (even of Government work) will pay so much better than another. Now if the Government — or anybody else who gives orders for any class of work — (this will apply all round) can afford to pay a decent price for one class of work, it follows that they can for another. And if, as the employers tell us, these orders arc in so many cases contracted for, and executed for such ridiculously small sums, who has the benefit? The Government? And through the Government the tax-payers? If so, it is clear that the few suffer for the apparent benefit of the many, which is manifestly unfair. But in undertaking these badly-paying orders does the employer reduce his percentage of profit in proportion to the price he pays his hands? Or does he first take what he considers right, and then give what remains to the workers? Now I believe under the present social system — in an employer taking his fair and proportionate — I emphasise both these words — percentage of profit on the capital he expends, and no more. To anything further than that I do not recognise his right. It is clear then in this case either that the Government, or whoever else may give orders of an inadequately paying class, is robbing — what else can we call it? — the employer and his hands, or else that the employment himself is the — robber. And may I say here that thinking over these things at different times, one form of remedy rather of alleviation — for one's sufferings has been – I confess that I have not much hope of ever seeing it come operation — that when these wretchedly-paying order' undertaken, first the employer in his percentage; next the manager, assistant manager, and all the ladies and gentlemen under them who get a living wage all the year round, no matter what kind of orders may be in process of execution, should have their wages reduced in exact proportion to the price paid the factory girl, and of the saving effected thereby the factory girl should receive her due share. What is there unfair in this?

The labourer of whatever class is worthy of his hire. If it is fair for one class of workers to be reduced it surely is for another. Now how shall we set about plucking up this root? Ask the employers to kindly consider it? Utterly useless! As things are at present, at least. We might as well look up beseechingly at the moon, and expect it to come down to our aid. We are now in an entirely disunited, disorganised state, and are consequently entirely at the mercy of the employers; and while we remain so, we shall, in my opinion, never get the slightest alleviation of this grievance. I propose then, as an ultimate, and not necessarily remote, means of remedy, that we, that is the factory girls of Crewe, and any other class of female workers who may like to join us, first organise ourselves into one strong united body, and further, that we affiliate with some already existing union of workers, and thus, when the time is ripe, shall we not only speak with an effective voice ourselves, but shall also have the help of other workers in the redress of our grievances, and on our part shall in turn be able to help others. I am of the opinion that a merely local union of factory girls alone would be of little or no use. We should never be sufficiently strong either to speak for ourselves or to maintain ourselves in case of need. Personally I look with favour on the Tailors" Union (I am not sure if that is its proper name) as peculiarly suitable for the admission of tailoresses; but I understand that tailors, as a body, absolutely refuse in this way to hold out helping hand to their suffering sisters, their reason, I believe, being that women have no business to be in their trade at all. I must say that I think this a very short-sighted, not to say selfish, view; and I am rather surprised that such an intelligent body of men as I know tailors to be should take such a view as they do. However, there is no help for it, and we must make the best of such means as we have, and affiliate ourselves with a union of workers who are not so exclusive. I know the Independent Labour Party have interested themselves in this question: and through their good offices it is now possible for us to organise ourselves and to affiliate ourselves with another body of workers — I am sorry that I forget the name of the union — and for anything I know to the contrary this will answer as well as anything else. When we are thoroughly organised, and not till then, I propose that we unitedly earnestly and determinedly set about the redress — or at any rate alleviation — of our grievances; that we try every means which will then be at our disposal to get these things righted.

And now let me say that I strongly deprecate a strike as means to this end. I would resort to a strike only as a very last resource, when all other means had failed; in such a case only, in my opinion, would a strike be justifiable. And until we are organised thoroughly, and independent of charity, such a course as a strike would be the height of folly.

Will you now, sir, if you can possibly spare me sufficient space, allow me to address my fellow-workers. I know they read my articles, sir; I have seen them in the act. My fellow-workers, then — you all know, and most of you acknowledge that what I have been telling the public is true — every word of it. You know that we cannot earn enough from eight in the morning till six at night to keep us in independence the year round, Now I tell you that we have an absolute right to a living wage; and the reason why we do not get it is that somebody who has money and power is taking advantage of our weak, unorganised, dependent state to rob us of our right. It is also well known to you that the prices paid for our work grow visibly less and less, and I tell you that this will continue, and things will grow worse and worse, unless we take steps to alter them. Now nobody can do this for us. Many people can help — are helping; through the powerful aid of Mr. Editor we have already enlisted the sympathy, and shall have the help of all sensible and right-thinking men and women. But this is of no avail unless we first help ourselves. Each one of you has apart to play. Do each your own part, not only for your own good but the good of others.

In one of my letters I likened this great grievance of ours — low prices for our work — to a stone wall. Now I alone may butt at this wall till I smash my head, and it will never move an inch; but if you individually, and all of you collectively, come with me, and we go at it with one or more if necessary strong, united, persistent 'butt' , in all probability the wall will fall. Each one of you then bravely do your own part.

I now beg, sir, to express my deep gratitude to you for the help you are affording the factory girls. I respectfully submit to you and Chronicle readers these the only practical suggestions of which I can think for the improvement of the condition of my class. I hope that you and my readers will give me the benefit of anything else, or anything better which may have suggested itself to you. In conclusion will you, sir, allow me to say that any influence I can in any way and at any time use for the furtherance of the above object with both voice and pen I shall use unhesitatingly and gladly.

Ada's 8th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

14th July 1894

Sir, — May I comment briefly on the letter from ‘A Lancashire Woman’ on the above subject in the current issue of the Chronicle.

I believe she is actuated by a real desire to help factory girls out of their troubles, and I accordingly thank her for her suggestion. I have no personal knowledge whatever of domestic service, but I quite agree with ‘ A Lancashire Woman ‘ that it may easily prove a more desirable, and less morally dangerous means of earning a livelihood than factory work. In my own case there are peculiar and quite insurmountable obstacles in the way of my adopting that means of bettering my position but to any of my class who have nothing against such course, would concur with ‘A Lancashire Woman ‘ in advising them to adopt her suggestion. Let the experiment be tried, by all means. I do not see, however, how the reduction of our number would materially benefit the remaining factory girls. Our greatest grievance — inadequate return for work done — would be unaffected by it, and therefore would still await redress.

Please let me reply also to ‘Another Factory Girl’ who criticises my articles in the same issue. May I first, sir, inform my fellow-worker that though I claim to be a lady, yet I am also a factory girl, and am not ashamed of that fact, the latter being (as must be well known to ‘Another Factory Girl’) the name by which I am invariably known in the Chronicle, I should be glad, if she should ever have occasion to refer to me again, if she would do so by that name. I look with very dubious eyes on her own signature, sir. If she is what she professes to be, and stands side by side with me in daily ‘competition’ at that table on which the public kindly spent some time with me a fortnight ago, she knows, as I then showed the public, that the work is not by any means served out in strictly ‘numerical’ order. She knows, too, that she is not adhering strictly to facts when she says that what appears favouritism consists in the employer handing work (the ’employer’ does not hand’ work at all) to those most efficient in its execution.

I wonder if she is a ‘favourite’? I myself have on occasion been regarded by my fellow-workers as somewhat of a favourite, and if I chose I could easily ingratiate myself into the ranks of the regulars — I know the way. But the idea is revolting to me. I want to stand side by side with my fellow-workers in real sisterhood and comradeship, and this I can never do if I step beyond them into the select band of ‘favourites’.

With regard to the second part of the letter, I am at a loss to understand by what process of reasoning she arrives at the conclusion that the tea-money is my ‘strongest point’. Those who comprehend me or who do not wilfully misunderstand me, know that my strongest point is, and has ever been inadequate return for work, and this is a matter quite separate from the tea-money. What a charming picture this is — the tea-money and the great benefits accruing to us therefrom, looked at through the spectacles of ‘Another Factory Girl’! I however, as will be seen elsewhere, am in the habit of looking at it through spectacles of quite another colour, and it is therefore no wonder that for me it wears a different aspect. May I ask Another Factory Girl’, sir, whether she has observed that the ‘cook’ of whom she speaks has other duties than those pertaining to the factory hands, such as the daily cleaning of the office, and the daily preparation of and attendance on the office tea. And could she inform me if the ladies and gentlemen in the office contribute their share to the expenses of this ‘cook’? I am naturally interested in that point, and moreover, consider that I have a right to information from somebody. As I deal with the whole of her letter elsewhere, I need not occupy your valuable space, sir, in replying to detail here. I am confident that you and Chronicle readers will take a deeper view of things than that taken by ‘Another Factory Girl’ without my aid. Thanking you for space, I remain, sir, yours sincerely,

Ada's 9th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

28th July 1894

Sir, — If I may, I should like to give Chronicle readers an account of some rather startling events which took place in the factory in which I work on Friday last.

For some time previously there had been distinct and audible rumblings, especially every Friday, when copies of the Chronicle were so much in evidence, but on this particular Friday, sir, the climax was reached, and the storm burst in full fury. I myself was, of course present, and I think I will first give a faithful account of the doings of the day, after which, with your permission, I will comment thereupon, and finally will again address my fellow-workers. You will understand that I am unable to do this in any direct way, only through the medium of the Chronicle. Now for Friday last. We had only been at work about an hour when we became aware that something special was about to happen. In the finishing department tables and chairs were removed to make an open space. The machinists were then fetched from their room, and any of us who were in the tea-room or anywhere else were informed that a meeting was about to be held and were requested to attend forthwith. When we were all duly assembled the manager ascended a kind of platform and proceeded to address us. I listened very keenly, and as nearly as I can give it the address was as follows:

He (the manager) had been desired by the employer, who had visited the factory the previous day, to call that meeting together. He had called it here (in the finishing department) for two reasons: First, because it was more conveniently — and secondly, because arranged — there was more room it was from this room that the necessity for it had arisen. He need not say what had caused the necessity for the meeting — that was well-known to all. Some of them had been with him long enough to remember what sacrifices had been made by the employers in times past for their comfort. However, 'base insinuations' and statements had been made by one of the newspapers that profit was being made out of the materials and tea-money. (The manager was here greatly agitated, and the next sentence was very emphatic.) He denied these statements. Not one farthing of profit was being made out of them. However, as a consequence of these 'base insinuations' he was desired by the employers to inform them that the tea-room would be closed. A pause was made here, evidently for some expression of opinion by us, but as for the moment we were all quite overcome, strict silence was maintained!

The manager proceeded to tell us that there was a supply of tea in hand, and next week we should have tea as usual without paying, because we had already paid for it. After then the tearoom would be closed. He also desired to inform the late risers that in future they must arrive at eight o'clock or stay out altogether, and no more penny fines would be taken from them. Having now recovered a little some of us found voice and asked what we were to do for dinner if the tea-room was to be closed altogether. And just now I observed one of the persons with whom I made Chronicle readers acquainted mounted on a form, and she being one who dines in the factory at this point was most eloquent. The answer was received that we should all have to suffer for the one who had written the letters, and that we must 'thank our friend for that' (meaning the writer of these letters). The manager then dismounted, and the meeting broke up.

Chronicle readers are aware by this time that as a class we are not very far-seeing, and accordingly many of us now proceeded in somewhat strong language to call down all sort of blessings on the head of the unfortunate one who had been the cause of this deprivation. During the morning great excitement was evident everywhere, and I observed congregations of girls assembled at intervals in the machine-room. I, being a finisher, was now too far away to hear what was being said, but I understand chat the object of the meetings was to devise some means of finding out and expelling the wicked girl who had written the letters. I am sorry, but not surprised, to say that I myself several times heard some rather creditable methods of doing this, which were more forcible than elegant proposals. And I think it only justice to say that these disgraceful propositions have not been confined to those of my own sex who are employed in this factory. And I can vouch for the truth of this statement because what I have just hinted at has been said to me — and before this particular Friday. During the morning a petition to have the tea-room remain open was addressed to the employers and submitted for the signatures of those of us who desired to sign. I have no knowledge whether this petition has since been forwarded to the employers. So much for the morning.

Now for the afternoon. A short time only had elapsed when we again became aware of something else in the wind! It transpired that a few brave spirits had arranged to assemble outside the office door (the office is situated midway between the machine and finishing departments) to interview the manager. Their object was to inform him that the tea-money, as was shown in the letters, was not the only grievance possessed by us. There was the 'favourite' question to deal with, he was informed, and the unfair way in which the work was distributed; about our having to rise at such unearthly hours to come and stand waiting outside the doors in a morning; and about a few girls, well-known to all of us, having a special gift this way, and as a consequence getting the work every day before we who were of a more sluggish disposition could get chance. Oh! it was an exciting meeting, sir. The two gentlemen who have us in charge were desired to attend, and we closed round these two and the manager, and what some of those plucky girls said would have warmed the hearts of Chronicle readers.

To go into the details of this meeting would, I am afraid take up all the columns of the Chronicle , and good as you are to me, sir, I can hardly expect that, so I shall have to content myself with just quoting one statement made by the manager and giving the results. I am rejoiced to say that the meeting had results of a practical nature. The statement made was follows: The manager knew of two or three girls who were then surrounding him who were in a league, and had all been concerned in the writing of the letters. (I shall have something to say in reply to this statement presently.) Now as to the results. As a preliminary we were informed that if we were not satisfied we had better leave. But this was not our object as we tried to show, and finally the following new rules were made and approved of by us: That in slack times we should stay out a day occasionally while the work accumulated, instead of coming in and wasting so much time, as at present; that turns should not be taken from coming early to the door; that no work should be placed on the table before eight o'clock; that we should take turns in strict order as we placed our work on the table; finally, that if on one day we did not all get served, those who did not should be the first to be served on the following day.

This last rule is worth all the trouble, for it has frequently been our fate — it has to be somebody's when there is not supply sufficient for all — to get no work one day and then on the next to see some who had some the day before, before me, and yet more , before us. We came back very much flushed and dishevelled — for it was rather a crushing meeting — but triumphant. But that was not the last meeting, sir. We had hardly been seated a minute when we noticed several of the married ladies consulting together, and finally marching off in a body to the meeting-ground. You will not be surprised to hear, sir, that on seeing this we girls could not restrain our laughter, and a hearty outburst was the result. I should like to take this opportunity of assuring the married ladies that we were not laughing in derision, as they seemed to think and naturally resented. But it was not that — the situation was really funny, sir. Well, we girls naturally wanted to hear what the favourites had to say, and the meeting being an open one we accordingly filed off again. We had not now got the front place, and were not near enough to hear everything distinctly, but I heard the manager say with reference to one of the married ladies who is an invalid that he would see that she had in the future what she had had in the past — all the light and best work, and he was sure that she was a very cruel, hard-hearted girl who would grudge this. I did not hear of any other result of the meeting which is of any moment.

And now let me comment on some of the transactions of this eventful day. First with regard to the statement made by the manager which I have quoted above. I desire to inform that gentleman and anybody else whom it may concern that there is not a single girl in the factory or out of it who knows or can prove the identity of the writer of the letters. I take it that nobody can prove I wrote the letters unless l, as the writer, had told them so, and I hereby emphatically declare that no girl or woman in Crewe can say that I have ever done so. Nor have I ever hinted in the slightest degree to any of my fellow-workers that I am the writer. It is therefore impossible that any of them, can have been concerned in the writing of the letters, and what the manager says he 'knows' is what he suspects, and is suspicion only. I make this statement as an act of justice to my fellow-workers. I am grieved that suspicion should attach anyone through my agency in writing the letters.

And now as to the meetings and the results arising therefrom. With regard to the sacrifices made by the employers our comfort — have throughout done them full justice in this direction. Now as to the 'base insinuations'. How can what I have said be construed thus? If you will refer to my letter you will see that I made no assertion whatever that profit was being made out of the materials or tea-money. But I did make the assertion that we had no certain knowledge to the contrary. And I repeat that assertion. The manager has denied this, as I have shown, but you will forgive me if I want more than mere denial — I want proof. I asked for proofs, and they have not been given, and until they are given I must take the liberty to maintain my position. Why should they be withheld? Why not treat us like thinking, reasoning beings and satisfy us on this point? We are not complaining in an uncharitable spirit, but surely we may expect to have a little charity shown us. Why not indulge us and give us proofs?

And now as to the decision come to by the employers to close the tea-room. This will necessarily cause great inconvenience to those who come from a distance and dine in the factory and also to the women pressers, whose work is very laborious and who need refreshment. But, sir, I am entirely at a loss to understand why this drastic measure should be taken at all and certainly do not see how I am responsible for it. I never contemplated being the means of depriving my fellow-workers of comforts to which they have become accustomed; and further, I deny that I am the means, or am the one to whom thanks is due (as stated by the manager) for this deprivation. If my fellow-workers will only exercise a little common sense they will surely see that it is the employers whom they have to thank, and not me. What I said, and shall say, is that we should have liberty such as is enjoyed in other factories, to have tea or not, as we please. Why not show us why this is impossible in our case? And supposing it is to be proved impossible, why not adopt my suggestions both in this case and that of the materials, and show us just how and in what way our money goes?

And now about the fines at the door. I made no comments whatever on that point — I simply stated that such a fine was imposed. I learn, however, that although the weekly contribution to the sick club is one-pence or two-pence, it cannot exist without these fines, and consequently will now cease to exist. I do not know if this is a serious matter at all to us. I suppose if it is it cannot be helped now.

And now as to the afternoon meetings. With the results of the first I am pleased and appreciate, and am grateful to and congratulate the energetic girls who were instrumental in bringing about these results. With regard to the case of invalids, etc., which was discussed at the meeting of married women, I ask Chronicle readers whether, throughout the course of my articles, I did not accord these cases justice and consideration? I declared before, and again declare that we girls do not grudge a fair share or more of the light work in such cases as these. But, sir, that is not what we complained about. What about the 'favourites' who have husbands in full employment? Please let us be treated as if we possessed at least a grain of sense.

As a general comment may I say, sir, that though we have been trying to lop off some of the branches, and have succeeded in lopping off one or two, the great root of all the evils the inadequate return for work done day by day — is there, stubborn and unyielding as ever, and about this nothing has been said.

If you can kindly give me space, sir, I will now address my fellow-workers. My fellow-workers: It did my heart good to see some of you last Friday, and stimulated me to persevere in the effort to eradicate as far as possible the evils from which we suffer. I hope great things from you, and I want to show you how we can accomplish great things. We all appreciate even the minor concessions — which are only acts of justice towards us — which you plucky girls obtained for us last Friday. But you know the root is there still. This is the root: The fact that if we work hard 9½ hours a day we are still unable to get enough to maintain ourselves. You know that as a result of the present rate of payment there is not a girl amongst us who, when there is work to do, does not have to work after factory hours. Now we need not do this if we are all resolved not to do so, and set about it in the proper way. And remember that in asking for a fair day's wage we are only asking for our own — our right. But we shall never get this great evil remedied by asking the manager. The only effective way has been proved to be to ask in a body, with one voice, through an authorised representative, with means at our command to give these appeals weight. Now as I told you before the only way of doing this is to organise ourselves. Don't you see that we must do this ourselves? That part nobody can do for us. The willing help, Mr. Editor, of the few earnest men who have made it possible for us to organise — have given us the means of doing so — and the sympathy — and sympathy helps — of all the sensible people of Crewe cannot materially benefit us unless we ourselves are willing to do our part.

I am not quite sure, and have not time now to ascertain, but I believe the Co-operative Hall, Market Street, is at our disposal on Tuesday evenings at 7.30, and help will be given us in the way of organising, and our part is to attend and join. I am very glad to be able to tell you that the members of the local branch of the Amalgamated Society of Tailors have met and discussed the position of the tailoresses, and as far as they are concerned have resolved to give us admission to this Society. If the branches in other parts of the country prove themselves as intelligent as that of Crewe and neighbourhood we shall have the protection and help of this powerful organisation. At present we await the decision of other branches. But we need not be idle meanwhile. We can be forming ourselves into a body, and then shall be ready for an existing organisation to take us in. Let me urge upon you therefore, those of you who wish to help in plucking up this root (remember when it is plucked up we shall all reap the benefit) to do your part by attending and joining. I know some of you have already done so. Come again, nevertheless, and help by your countenance those who have not. Come in a body. DO not be afraid. Some of you showed last Friday that there is mettle in you. Come and show it again in this way. Do not be deterred because others are reluctant; probably if you come somebody else will. Do not be deterred because you are thinking of getting married, land therefore you may not reap any direct benefit yourself. Don't you see that that is rather a selfish way of looking at 'it, and that if you do not get the benefit (and in an indirect way you will) you will help to confer it on others by joining? In conclusion let me assure you that my object in trying to show how we may set about plucking up this root is that you as well as myself may have the benefit arising therefrom. I would also like to say that I make these remarks to all the tailoresses in Crewe, and not only to those with whom I am myself associated.

I beg you will allow me, sir, to publicly express my heart-felt gratitude to you for the reforms which through the agency of the Chronicle have already taken place, and for the hope of bringing about greater reforms in the future. I should look on it as a favour if you would also let me say that the sensible ones amongst us appreciate thoroughly the powerfulaid which you yourself, sir, have given us by your remarks on our grievances.

Ada's 10th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

4th August 1894

Sir, — The storm of Friday, the 20th, was followed by a hurricane on Thursday, the 26th inst.

As the full blast of the hurricane fell on the head of one individual, and that one of your correspondent, you will not be surprised to hear, sir, that my recollections of what took place while it lasted (an hour) are of a somewhat confused nature, and the feeling it has left is a decidedly sore one. I think, nevertheless, that I need not ask you to let me use the Chronicle for the purpose of justifying myself, and of stating and replying to whatever I can remember of what was said during this hurricane. Let me explain! When we returned from dinner on this particular Thursday we found that one of the employers had come down from London. We were immediately requested to assemble ourselves on the meeting ground described last week. It is utterly useless for me to try to give a precise and orderly account of this meeting, so that I shall have to ask you, sir, to let me give as clear an idea as l can, and to leave the rest to the imagination of my readers. The employer began by referring to my letters. I cannot regard the whole of his remarks on them as anything but a long series of insults and sneers against the girl who had written them and the Editor who had published them, and as such sneets deserve nothing but contempt I shall not particularise or comment upon them.

Now I played a prominent part in that meeting, sir, and I think to make Chronicle readers understand what took place during the meeting I had better explain two small matters. One is that from what transpired it is evident that the employer had come down with the express purpose of compelling the writer of the letters to reveal her identity, if she possessed any Sense of honour at all. The other item I want you to notice is that for some reason I myself had from the very beginning been suspected by everybody in the factory to be the writer of the letters.

To return to the meeting. What first brought me to the light of day was a question from the employer as to whether any of us were dissatisfied with the existing state of things. No diligent student of the Chronicle needs telling whether I am dissatisfied. Accordingly I acknowledged this to be the case. This was just what was wanted. The manager immediately descended from his high estate (alongside the employer) and fetched me — was so kind as to assist me. I was invited, I remember, by both the employer and the manager to the front, to take up my position between them and to address the audience. But not feeling able, as a matter this I resolutely refused to do — of fact. I stood, then just below them — quite by myself. I was naturally very much agitated. Before I proceed I want to ask you, in justice to me, to look calmly on both sides. On the one the employer, whom we only see occasionally; the manager, who, though better known to us, is yet an awe-inspiring personage in our midst, both of whom, as I can testify, had addressed audiences before, both prepared for this afternoon ‘s work; upwards of 400 girls and women, all knowing, though not daring to say, that what had been made public was true, many of them strongly in sympathy with the writer of the letters, others, for some reason, very bitter against her; and a number of men and boys, all intently looking on. That is one side. This is the other. One girl, who though she had used her pen occasionally, had never in her life faced an audience before, now suddenly brought face to face with one, without any preparation whatever. Are the two sides equal? I put it, sir, to you and Chronicle readers whether it was fair to come down suddenly with the express purpose of finding out the author of the letters, and of holding her up to ridicule before those for whom she had written. Had I known of the intention of the employer I, as the ‘Factory Girl’, would have come prepared. I should not have stayed away. By no means. But I, too, like the employer, should have prepared myself, like him I should have had notes in my hand, to refresh my memory and to keep my ideas clear, and I should have done my level best to have defended the position I had taken up.

Before I resume my narrative I want to accord justice to my fellow-workers. It is a fact, then, that though not one of them bore me out in anything I said — on the contrary went entirely against me and their own consciences (as they assured me later), yet they did not take advantage of the many hints which were given them to laugh me scornfully down, and the vast majority of them treated me respectfully, both then and later. Perhaps I may say here that my heart is full of gratitude to them for the kind things they said to me afterwards.

And now to resume. The employer proceeded to interrogate me in the most merciless manner. Out of my confused recollections I distinctly remember telling him that he was not treating me in a gentlemanly way, and after further reflection in cooler moments I do not withdraw that statement, and shall never withdraw it. The impression I received and conveyed to him has deepened a hundredfold since. I remember also acknowledging myself to be the writer of the letters, and emphatically declaring that I was not ashamed of having written them. I remember too, and very keenly, what led me to do this. One reason was that the employer persistently referred to the writer as 'she or they' , and made it evident that he suspected more than one; and the other reason was that he repeatedly said whoever wrote anonymously was ashamed of what they wrote. Now, sir, I am not invulnerable, and I could not withstand that attack. Hence the declaration quoted above. Perhaps I may say that though I could not withstand that last sentiment expressed by the employer directed against myself, still I do not agree with it, and strongly disputed it with him.

The employer's next course, on my acknowledging myself to be the writer of the letters, was to subject me to a searching cross-examination as to who had helped me — suggested several means of help which I had probably availed myself of, finally suggested that you yourself, sir, had probably had a great deal to do with the composition and arrangement of the letters. Of course I denied all this, and a great deal followed which is all very personal indeed, and has nothing whatever to do with the point at issue. I think I will not say anything more about the meeting itself, except that the employer told my fellow-workers in concluding that he hoped they would not let what I had done make any difference in their treatment of me — that they would not show me any disrespect. I was very much astonished to hear that, sir, and am still greatly puzzled about it. If any Chronicle reader can give any enlightenment as to why such a caution should have been deemed necessary, I shall be glad.

And now, sir, with your permission I will state and reply to whatever I can remember of what was said during the hurricane. A great deal was said about the tea-money, and profit being made out of it. Well, we have at last obtained the long asked for information, and despite the denial of the manager the previous Friday, it was acknowledged that there certainly is profit made out of it. Such profit, however, we were informed, has been expended in 46 (l believe) sets of china, sugar basins, etc., for the use of the annual tea party (on no other occasion). The tea party itself, it was acknowledged, is also in some degree provided for out of this tea-money; and also gifts made by the manager to very needy cases amongst us, which we have all been aware of, it now transpires, are provided for out of our tea-money. I believe the yearly amount of profit was given, but my mind was in too great a state of confusion by that time to get a clear idea of figures. My reply is that I do not know whether we have ever been consulted about these things — not in my time — but I certainly think that as we have a share in paying for them we ought to be consulted in the matter of buying china, etc. , with our money. And about making presents. I do not think we should have any objection to five shillings or ten shillings being given occasionally to deserving cases which are well-known to us all, but I think it should have been made known before this from what source the money was drawn. Honour to whom honour is due. And it is clear also, as I remember pointing out to the employer and also to the manager, who interviewed me later in the day, that we who have not been taking the tea have been paying more than others towards the tea party. I cannot see justice in that. I do not remember what reply they gave me — it was not clear, I think. But I personally should give my 8s 6d a year the preference of the tea party. I could easily get a good tea for that, and could treat myself to an entertainment as well, and should besides have the privilege of selection, which I have not in this case.

I also obtained a portion of the information for which I asked in one of my letters — whether the ladies and gentlemen in the Office contributed their share towards the expenses of the 'cook'? Of late there has been only one gentleman in the office — the manager — and he was kind enough to inform me that he did not take tea in the office, but that the two ladies — his daughter and her assistant — did not pay for their tea. My answer to that is that they ought to pay — that they have no right to drink tea at other people's expense, on the unanimous vote of my fellow-workers, the decision come to by the employers to close the tea-room was at the close of this meeting rescinded. Accordingly this week the boy has again visited us with his money bag and checks. Some of us have refused to buy the checks. Our names have been recorded in the office, for what purpose we are not aware. The fines at the door were also reinstated on the unanimous vote of the factory hands. A balance sheet of the funds of the sick club, and the addition of the fines, was read out to us, but I have not the slightest idea of it which is of any use. Something was said, too, about the system of 'favourites', and the employer asked me what I meant by it. I informed him that I had explained it in my letters. I did not feel able to repeat my explanation verbally, and he persisted that what I considered favouritism consisted in the work being given to those best qualified to do it. Now I have shown that this is not the case, and I am willing to submit and leave it to Chronicle readers whether I, who see it every day, know anything about it, as well as the employer, who does not see it at all. A great deal was said, too, about the prices paid for our work, and the employer assured us that he gave us the best price he could afford, and that if the Government or others would pay him more he would in turn pay us more, and that sometimes he was actually a loser after vouchsafing to us a somewhat more munificent price than usual. Well, sir, I am a little dubious about all this. I do not quite believe all I am told! But my reply is that if this is true then the Government or whoever else pays these ridiculously low sums for the clothing of soldiers and policemen ought to be made to pay more, and the sooner they are made the better, so that those who do their work can live by the work they do.

The employer asked me, I remember, what the remedy was for this? I have plainly shown throughout that I do not expect to get this evil remedied by merely asking him. The only remedy that I can see is for the girls themselves to unite, and in a body to set to work earnestly and intelligently, and not only — a living wage. If this course to ask but to demand their right is so certain to prove ineffectual, as the employers assure us, why are they so careful and persistent in advising us not to adopt it? Where is the need for the advice if what they tell us be true? Is it their overwhelming desire for our welfare which influences them in giving us this advice? Whose interests are they considering? Ours or their own?

Reference was made to the number of hours worked in busy seasons. The employer did not think they were excessive compared with the hours of other workers. I say in reply to that that it is time the hours of other workers were reduced if that is the case. Reference was made also to my having been kept waiting at the office window when getting materials. The employer could not promise that it would not occur again. An excuse was made in that the young ladies are sometimes adding up columns of figures. My answer is that I can see when they are adding up columns of figures, and it is not only on such occasions that I have been kept waiting. This is a very small matter, and I do not wish to dwell on it. If the young ladies are not truly lady-like enough to object to keeping girls waiting unnecessarily I have nothing further to say, and my fellow-workers and I must submit to what we cannot alter.

Nothing whatever was said about the system of selling us materials, and we have still no certain knowledge that profit is not being made out of these as out Of the tea-money. I had not presence of mind to make any enquiries about this matter. Finally, sir, the one great objection of both employer and manager, to which they persistently referred, was that I had 'blazoned forth' (the employer's term) our grievances in the public press. I ought, they said, to have made my objections to them. As an illustration they asked me repeatedly whether, if anything were wrong at home, I should write to the newspaper about it? My answer is no, most decidedly I should not, for two reasons. First, because I am quite sure that you, sir, would not lend me the columns of the Chronicle for such a trivial purpose; secondly, because I should object to have my private affairs 'blazoned forth'. But the cases are not parallel. What I have made public concerns not only the 400 employed in the factory in which I work, but also those employed in several other factories in Crewe, and indirectly every inhabitant of Crewe, and therefore is a fitting subject for the public press. I ought to have appealed to the employer as to a father, he tried to convince me. I Say no, sir. I do not look on the employer in the light of a father, nor does he look on mc and my fellow-workers with fatherly eyes. No father would have treated his child as the employer treated me on Thursday last, if proof is necessary. So that I may be excused, I think, for applying to other sources for help in my need.

This is all I can remember of what took place on Thursday last which is of any consequence. If there is anything else which I have forgotten to which I ought to reply, I shall be glad if anybody will point it out to me. If you will allow me, sir, I should like to inform my employer that I shall be glad to meet and answer anything he may wish to ask me, and to defend myself to the best of my ability, either in the columns of the Chronicle or personally. I should, however, greatly prefer the former, for my pen obeys my will far more readily than my voice. And if the latter I must stipulate that I have due notification of the intention of the employer, and that we have an unbiased arbitrator present to See fair play between us.

The employer now knows whom he is combating. He very tenderly assured me that he had read all my letters, so that he will no doubt read this one also. I should like now to make a very emphatic and, I hope, final declaration. During the time that my letters have been appearing I have heard several people, men and women, some employed in the factory, some outside, accused, in conjunction with myself, of complicity to a greater or lesser degree in the production of the letters. My declaration is as follows: That no other single person in the factory or out of it has had anything whatever to do with them in any way whatever. The writer is herself now known, and she alone is responsible for what has been made public.

I remain, sir, yours sincerely,

A CREWE FACTORY GIRL

Ada's 11th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

25th August 1894

Sir, — Please allow me to acquaint Chronicle readers with some events which have taken place in one of the Crewe factories since the disclosure, on July 26th, of my identity the writer of the letters on 'Life in a Crewe Factory' which have appeared in the Chronicle.

On Saturday morning, 4th August, a private meeting of some duration was held in the tea-room by the married women, at which the manager was present. One of the two men who have charge of the finishers kept guard at the tea-room door. On seeing and hearing the girls express amongst themselves their natural interest in and amusement at the proceedings this gentleman left the door, and came round expostulating with some warmth. The object of the meeting was kept secret. Whether what I shall now relate was an effect of any discussion and resolution arrived at that meeting I shall leave my readers to judge The following Monday was Bank Holiday. On Tuesday morning almost as soon as we had begun work a tailor employed in the factory was summarily discharged. I want to ask you, in justice to this tailor, to consider his case on its merits as I will show it to you, and to give your verdict, which I do not fear, as to whether his dismissal was justifiable one.

He had been in the employ of the firm a number of years. He was acknowledged by them to be a clever and careful work man, and a most useful and capable man. But it is also a fact he was known to hold advanced views on things in general, and what is also worthy of notice he has never been heard to express any disapproval of the letters on factory life which were published by the Chronicle. On the contrary, he has been suspected, and I myself have heard him accused, of assisting me to produce those letters. I have repeatedly and emphatically denied this, both publicly and privately, but seemingly without the slightest effect in convincing those in authority that what I say is true.

I shall also be obliged to confess that this unfortunate tailor has without doubt been guilty of speaking quite frequently and without showing any disrespect, to the writer of the letters, I am aware that some excuse was found for his dismissal; but I think in view of what I have just shown, that the public will not need much convincing as to what was the cause of that dismissal.

During this same Tuesday morning rumours of impending changes were rife in the factory, and one of the men who pass the finishers' work hinted very strongly to several of the girls that they were about to be discharged. I, on hearing this, and after the dismissal of the tailor, at which I naturally felt indignant — though not, I am sorry to say, surprised — thought that the discharging of a number was probably the method which was to be adopted as a means of getting rid of me. As I hinted very plainly in my second letter, I expected that if ever l were identified some means would be found of compelling me to leave. But I never thought that I should be the means of bringing misfortune on a number of innocent girls. On hearing these rumours, therefore, I naturally felt anxious to prevent the discharge of other girls if possible, and accordingly I told the manager that I wished to leave. He did not express any desire to retain my services. On the contrary he told me that he was expecting an order for my discharge on the following morning. Unfortunately it did not occur to me just then to enquire what reason was to be given for my discharge. I can only suppose that the reason was that I had written the letters to the Chronicle.

I left, then, on this Tuesday afternoon. On the following evening it came to my knowledge that 12 girls (besides myself) had been discharged. I understand that these girls naturally asked the reason for their discharge, and that the answer was 'Slackness of work', and the discontented ones must go'.

I will now state the case of these girls, and will ask for your verdict, which again I do not fear, as to the validity of the excuse just named. The girls, with the exception of one or two married women, are absolutely the most capable and experienced finishers which were employed by the firm.

This is proved by what it is impossible for the employers to deny that the girls have been in the habit of taking all the best kinds of work, and have displayed skill and execution in the performance of it. One has been in the employ of the firm thirteen years, another eleven years, five or six tour or five years, and the least term of service is two years. With three exceptions they are girls who had given in their names as desirous of organising at meetings held for that purpose. They are of the girls who, as I stated in the Chronicle of July 28th, had courage enough to interview the manager with a view to getting a re-arrangement of the rules relating to the distribution of work. And this is their reward! It is worthy of notice, too, that these girls are of those who, on that memorable day when we were suddenly confronted by the employer, afterwards openly expressed regret at not having confirmed my statements, and approval of my conduct in maintaining my position. They are girls, too, who have shown a special fondness for the Chronicle of late, and I myself heard an insulting remark made by one of the men who pass the work, to one of the girls who has since been discharged, as she stood side by Side with me at the table on which Chronicle readers were entertained a short time ago — a remark relating to the reading of the Chronicle , of which, sir, this poor girl had evidently been guilty that morning (which was Friday August 3rd).

I could tell, too, of a rather spiteful thing which I saw played on a girl for this same offence. Several of the girls have fathers, and are entirely dependent on their own exertions for a livelihood. They have devoted the best years of their life to the employer who has just now discharged them, and are consequently now only qualified as tailoresses. I do not see how the discharge of these girls can be regarded as anything but cruel in the extreme. Are any of the offences which I have just enumerated worthy of dismissal after years of faithful service? And is it in accordance with reason to discharge the most valuable hands because work is slack?

We girls, as I have shown, have all had some experience, and have seen many slack seasons (more than the present one) but have never before seen experienced hands discharged and inexperienced ones retained. As to the charge of discontent, may we, then, not have the privilege of exercising our reasoning and thinking faculties? Are we required to be human beings, or machines? The discontent which as beings possessed of an average amount of sense it would be a disgrace on us not to feel did not prevent the due and satisfactory performance of our work, which is the only thing for which the employer pays us, and therefore I maintain that he had no right to discharge us on that account. I understand that the tea-money which had on the previous day been paid by some of the discharged ones, was on their discharge returned to them. This was as it should be, and I am glad that it was done. I should like to say, however, that during the years we have been working in the factory we must have paid a considerable sum, which could easily be calculated, towards the purchase of the China, Sugar basins, etc. I would respectfully suggest, now that we have been discharged, either that the money we have paid be returned to us, or that our share of the china be distributed amongst us. It is quite clear that our money has bought a portion of it, and I think it would only be right to put us in possession of what is indubitably ours.

I would like to say that the proof — for which we have a perfect right to ask — that no profit is being made out of the materials supplied to the factory hands has never been given us; and in view of the fact that the same quality materials can be procured in the town of Crewe at a considerably less price than that charged in the factory; and in view of the additional fact that hands employed in the factory are in the habit of taking justifiable advantage of the knowledge of the former fact to procure materials from outside sources surreptitiously — in view of these facts, and of that of proof to the contrary being withheld, I am afraid we shall be obliged , however reluctantly, to come to the conclusion that it seems very probable that profit is made out of the materials, as out of the tea-money.

It would be satisfactory to have some information as to the way in which this profit is expended. We need not doubt that it is returned to the factory hands in some useful way, but it would only be kind to gratify our natural curiosity as to what particular benefit is conferred on them by this profit.

I have now shown the results, sir, to my fellow-workers and myself of the faithful representation of the undeniable evils from which the factory girls of Crewe are suffering, which have appeared from my pen in the columns of the Chronicle. I ask Chronicle readers whether this result is warrantable, or is anything like fair, to say nothing of generous treatment, from employers to employed? Why should we be discharged, and our means of earning a livelihood taken from us, for simply showing what cannot be denied, that the conditions of the life which we, not the employers, have to live are bad and detrimental to our moral welfare, and for proposing and adopting an ultimate means of improving those conditions — for attempting to protect ourselves as employees by uniting in one common interest? The employers and their representatives have repeatedly told us that they have no objection to our forming a union — that the most powerful organisation in the world will never obtain us anything more than we have. Why, then, on meeting nights, should men employed in the factory find it necessary to pass and re-pass the doors of the meeting- room, and also should have such a fit of curiosity on these particular evenings as to closely watch all who enter the room from a spot in the close vicinity of the doors which I could name? Why, I ask? Why should girls be frightened so effectually that they dare not acknowledge that they have joined, or would like to join a union of factory girls which is forming? If combination on the part of the girls is destined never to affect the employers in any way, then why not let the girls alone, and let them amuse themselves, if they choose, in this way? I cannot see why the employers and those under them should concern themselves about these matters so much in the privacy the factory, as I have seen and heard them concern themselves.

We factory girls have been informed by those who were authority over us, that it was the determination of the employers to 'put down their foot' on those letters in the Chronicle. Presumably this frightening the poor is the method adopted by the employer of putting down his feet. Why not come out and let the strong light of the public press shine on his doings? Why not put his foot down on the letters in the only open, straightforward way? He has been invited time after time to submit his case to the public. I will answer for the public that they would give him a fair hearing, as they have given the factory girls a fair hearing. On the day on which I had the pleasure of an interview with the employer, I remember asking him why he did not meet me on my own ground — in the Chronicle? His reply was that he did not deign to notice such communications as mine. I remember its occurring to me at the time that such a statement was a little ludicrous and contradictory in face of the meeting which was then being held. But I certainly cannot help thinking that it would be quite dignified on the part of the employers to write to the press as 'deign' to frighten the poor girls in the factory.

In conclusion, sir, if you will allow me, I should like inform my late fellow-workers that through no fault of mine I am no longer one of them, yet in sympathy — warmest deepest sympathy — and recollections of sufferings borne side by side with them — I am still with them, and shall always be with them. Anything which I may be able to do at any time in any way towards the effort to improve the conditions of their life, I shall do most gladly. And I would beg them also to be resolute in doing their part by uniting themselves, which is the only way to accomplish anything substantial.

I am, sir, yours sincerely,

(An EX) Crewe Factory Girl

Ada's 12th letter

The Crewe Chronicle

22nd September 1894

With your permission I should like to comment on the statements made by Messrs Compton in an interview with Mr. Thorne, an official of the Gasworkers' Union, published in the current issue of the Chronicle.

I read those statements, sir, with deep interest, with sincere satisfaction, and, if I may say so, a little amusement. I am glad to hear Messrs Compton reiterate their kind permission for their work people to organise in a union, for which permission I have always given them credit. I should be obliged if they would confirm their statement by instructing their subordinates to allow my late fellow-workers their liberty to exercise their right to this privilege without fear of its becoming known that they are doing or have done so, and without incurring the ridicule of those in authority.

I am very much pleased to hear that Messrs Compton have now no animosity against any of the dismissed girls. This is a change of feeling which does them credit. Messrs Compton have an undeniable right to discharge any number of hands they please when they have not work for them to do, but one point still puzzles the ordinary mind, sir, why in this case it was found necessary to do what had never 'been done before, namely to discharge capable and experienced hands — against whom there was no animosity?

I am rather at a loss to understand why Messrs Compton should announce that, if the girls applied for work, 'no objection would be made to them'. May I ask what possible objection could be made to us? What have we done for which we ought to apologise? Please allow me to ask also, sir, whether Mr. Wadkiss, the tailor who, after years of faithful and more than ordinarily effective service, was on the same day and apparently for the same reason (whatever that was) summarily dismissed with us, may now also apply for work? Is there any animosity against him? Personally I feel that it would hardly be fair to reinstate us and to leave the poor tailor out in the cold. Is there any objection to his returning with us? I have a keen and grateful remembrance, sir, of generous warm-hearted sympathy openly and unhesitatingly given me without fear of consequences, by Mr. Wadkiss, at a time when I sorely needed it. I am bitterly grieved that he should suffer through any action of mine.

Let me now say a few words on the remainder of Messrs Compton's remarks which concern myself alone. I fully discussed and debated the point referred to by Mr. Compton with that gentleman on the day on which he kindly paid my fellow workers and me an unexpected visit during which he politely referred to my letter writing to the papers. I am sorry that he is still sore on that point, sir, but I still adhere to the opinion I expressed to him then, that I have a right to make public any knowledge I possess, with the sanction of the Editor to whom I submit my information. I have a profound respect for the public press; I look upon it as the most powerful agent for good this country possesses; I am thankful that it is a free press, open to employed as well as to employers; and I am thankful that the Chronicle was open to me and willingly extended and still extends a powerful helping hand to oppressed factory girls.

As to complaining to the firm, I may as well confess , sir, that if I could begin at the beginning again, and were positive that that the statement made by Mr. Compton were true — that I should not have been discharged — I should still prefer to exercise my undeniable right to write to you. And Mr.

Compton will admit, that when he invited me to complain to him, I was not backward in doing so, so that he will give me credit for honesty of purpose. If I exercise my right to complain in any way which pleases me best, Mr. Compton will forgive me, and being a gentleman, will allow a lady to use her prerogative of having her own way.

And now, sir, may I state a comment on some beneficial results of my letters which I briefly referred to last week. It will be remembered that in one of my letters I asked for proof that no profit was made out of the materials supplied the factory hands. I asked to see the bills for the materials; because, as I had to earn the money to buy them I considered and still consider, that I had a right to know where every farthing of my money went, in this way as in the tea-money. In the latter case, will be remembered, I was informed that my two-pence weekly went to buy china (which I do not possess) and to provide me with a tea once a year which, I admit, was a good tea, and which I enjoyed, though I did not know at the time that my money had helped to buy it. This was satisfactory in so far as I knew what was done with the profit, but in the case of the materials, while I was in the factory no proof was given that profit was not made.

The other week, however, considerable reductions were made in the charge for materials in the factory. Reels of silk for which I paid Is 4d, I understand are now one shilling; skeins of thread which formerly were 1 ½ d are now one penny; and a halfpenny in every two yards of two kinds of twist (for button-holes) is allowed. These are reductions which anybody who has had to buy to use them will appreciate thoroughly. I calculate that at the very least it will mean an extra 10 shillings a year in the pocket of each girl. That will go a long way towards providing her with a much needed holiday once a year.

I rejoice with my late fellow-workers in this most appreciable concession, and if I had written for nothing else, my letters would be worth this alone, but I hope you will pardon me if I say that I am not satisfied yet. If I were working in the factory I should still want to know whether the present reduced price is the original one or whether it is only a reduction of profit. In the case of the reels of silk, I believe they can be procured in the town of Crewe at a less price even than that now charged in the factory, and it is only reasonable to suppose that the shopkeeper wants to make a little profit by which to live, which does not apply to Messrs Compton. So that I should not be satisfied yet. And I cannot help wondering, sir, whether Messrs Compton have suddenly obtained the materials at a greatly reduced rate? Or whether the price formerly charged was with the addition of profit on the original? If the latter, whom did the profit benefit? Was it returned to us in some appreciable way, as in the china and sugar basins, or what became of it? I hope I am not of an insatiably curious disposition, but these thoughts certainly occur to me, and if I were working in the factory, I should want to know something about these points, and if I wrote to the Chronicle and you, sir, recognised the justice of my enquiries, I should still consider that I was acting within my rights in publicly making my wishes known.

Now, sir, it stands proved that profit was made out of the materials and tea-money, despite the emphatic denial of the manager. I ask if for that reason alone, to say nothing of the wretched prices paid for the work and the vicious system of favourites, I was not justified in writing to the press? And what might not the girls effect if they would all organise and stand shoulder to shoulder in a resolute body? I wished to-day to have referred to the Truck Act, and its application to the deduction for materials, for tea-money, for the sick club, and for breakages of machinery, which I understand is also practice in Messrs Compton's factory. But as I should like to go into it again as well and as fully as I can, and have already, I am afraid, occupied considerable space, I think I had better leave it today , and will beg you to favour me again, sir. Perhaps next week, if you can give me space. It is a subject well worth the attention of my readers.

Thanking you for space, I am, sir

Yours sincerely
Ada Nield