
Mrs. Leonora M. Barry: General Instructor and Director of Woman's Work, Knights of Labor ¹

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 14, no. 5 (May 1890), pp. 399-402.

Mrs. Leonora M. Barry, the subject of this sketch, is a native of the Emerald Isle, and her birth place was the city of Cork, within sound of the "Bells of Shandon," made famous by Francis Mahony ("Father Prout"), and she, doubtless, sings with him

With deep affection
And recollection
I often think of
Those Shandon bells,
Whose sounds so wild would,
In the days of childhood,
Fling round my cradle
Their magic spells.²

Ireland has furnished the United States of America with many noble types of manhood — orators, statesmen, soldiers, and divines and women, too, of equal worth, and it so happens that it is now the good fortune of the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* to speak of one of the latter who has won an enviable renown in a work as philanthropic as has ever challenged the intellectual and spiritual gifts of women

¹ The timing of this long article on a lesser-known high functionary of the Knights of Labor is not accidental, coming in the aftermath of formation of the Supreme Council of the United Orders of Railway Employees on June 6, 1889, and amidst pressure to bring the Knights — who had a significant presence in the ranks of employees of certain Eastern lines — into the Supreme Council's ranks. Articles on the Knights of Labor ran frequently in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, not doubt in the hopes of building an organizational bridge.

² From "The Shandon Bells" (c. 1835), by **Francis Sylvester Mahony** (1804-1866).

since man's inhumanity, ignorance, superstition, and mercenary greed subjected women to wrongs, entailing sufferings, mental and physical, such as demand the genius of a Milton or a Dante to fitly portray.

Mrs. Barry's maiden name was Kearney, her father being John Kearney, whose ancestors were among the first who worked to redeem the "Shamrock Isle" from a wilderness. Her mother was of English ancestry and of noble lineage, and, though suffering impoverishment through the fickleness of fortune, retained those distinguishing traits of character which survive the wreck of estates and are transmitted as a priceless heritage to children.

When Leonora was but two years old, in 1853, the family emigrated to America, and settled in Pierrepont, St. Lawrence

County, New York. Here Leonora lived until 1866. Her home was one of rural beauty. There was "the orchard, the meadow, the deep tangled wildwood."³ There, among the fruit trees and maple groves, the birds sang their sweetest melodies; there the wild flowers bloomed; there bees gathered their luscious store, and the brooks laughed and sang and danced their way to the sea. Amidst such scenes Leonora's childhood and voting girlhood were passed. In love with the beauties of nature, no sorrow shaded her pathway, and from the horizon to the zenith no storm cloud lowered betokening sorrow. Nevertheless, a great sorrow was in store for the buoyant, happy girl, and it came. It was the death of her dear mother. It was the first great sorrow. Up to March 1866, Leonora had been gay, joyous, and as happy as the daisies, the wild flowers and the birds. But all was changed now, a mother's voice was silenced, and the lighthearted girl became a thoughtful, ambitious, self-reliant woman. Her great desire was to teach school. Still she lingered at home until in one short year another Mrs. Kearney came to the home. That settled the question, and in 11 days after the new Mrs. Kearney came, Leonora took her



³ Allusion to "The Bucket" by **Samuel Woodworth** (1784-1842).

destiny into her own hands, and in a short time entered upon her task of teaching. She had secured a third grade certificate, and at \$5 a week and "boarding round," commenced ascending the ladder of her ambition, in District No. 4, Pierrepont. Just here it is worthwhile to say — because it illustrates a characteristic of the noble woman, who had determined alone and single-handed to support herself — Miss Kearney began teaching in March, and though not till August, she achieved the distinction of having the most successful school ever taught in the district. Having taught four terms, Miss Kearney's ambition was to teach in a school of a higher grade, but her education was defective. In her younger days, she had attended the village school six weeks, all the rest of her educational equipment had been furnished by her sainted mother. Four terms in a district school at So a week did not furnish sufficient surplus to attend the Normal school, at Potsdam, and her father deemed her education sufficient to grace a farmer's home, and declined to invest for her higher training as a teacher. But the farmer, with his pigs and poultry, was not the acme of her ambition as it was of *pater familias*, as a consequence the Normal schooling was not secured, nor the father's money.

Then came another departure for our heroine. From the school she sought, and obtained an opportunity to learn the art of dressmaking. Here was work in earnest, and with needle and thread and scissors. Miss Kearney joined the ranks of working women. It was stitch, snip, fit, and baste — in a word, work. Work is usually unprosaic, rather than poetic, but is not sufficiently vapid and humdrum to dissuade cupid from testing the effects of his darts upon susceptible hearts, and as a result, Miss Kearney in 1870, became Mrs. Barry; having married Mr. William K. Barry, a native of the "Gem of the Sea," a musician and composer of note and merit. With Mrs. Barry, marriage was not a failure. As wife and mother the blessings of "Love's young dream" were realized — a quiet and happy married life was vouchsafed — but for only a comparatively brief period. On April 29th, 1880, the husband, after a lingering sickness of two years, was removed by death. This great bereavement, in a few months, was followed by the death of a daughter, the eldest of three children. The youngest child was only 18 months old when the father was taken, and for many weary months the baby suffered from an affliction, testing to the fullest extent a mother's devotion. The protracted sufferings of the husband exhausted the savings of years, and the widow found herself confronted with the problems that have come to thousands —

work, beg, or starve. Mrs. Barry was not long in determining her course. Work was accepted with heroic fortitude. The ordeal was severe. A lone woman with two children to support by the work of her hands ought to be, in this high noon of our boasted civilization, something less than a herculean task, but to the eternal discredit of cruel and exacting employers, it becomes one of the most doubtful and difficult enterprises a brave woman ever undertook. Mrs. Barry was equal to the emergency, and at once sought and found work in the Pioneer Hosiery Mill, of Amsterdam, NY. In this mill she toiled for four years and seven months, until the fall of 1886.

In preparing this sketch for the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, there is no purpose to indulge in undue laudation. Hitherto, too little has been said of heroic women, who, comprehending the wants of their toiling sisters, go forth on their missions of mercy, weeping, "bearing precious seed," believing that "they shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bearing their sheaves with them." Their deeds should be known. Their work, their sacrifices, their noble words of encouragement, their inspiring example, should form a much larger part of the literature of labor, than has hitherto been awarded.

Let it be understood that Mrs. Leonora M. Barry, in the Hosiery Mills of Amsterdam, NY, discovered that women were underpaid; that young girls working in factories were wanting in self-respect, owing to factory associations, and that all working girls were denied the respect due them by those who did not work. Long before Mrs. Barry ever heard of the Knights of Labor, she was devising schemes whereby those of her sex engaged in factory work might be benefitted mentally, morally, and physically. Her plans were deemed impractical, and those from whom she sought advice and encouragement treated her views as visionary and laughed at them. Hers was the fate of all reformers. The laughing tribe is numerous.

At this juncture came the Knights of Labor to Amsterdam. Mrs. Barry was cautious and stood aloof from the organization. But when she had informed herself of its aims, she thought she saw in the Order the full realization of her dreams — the fulfillment of her hopes — and on February 12, 1884, she became a Knight of Labor. Mrs. Barry became a member of the great order of the Knights of Labor because she was in sympathy with its lofty purpose to work and battle for the good of wage-earners of the country — including women — and her determination to remain with the Knights was like that of Ruth when

she said to Naomi: "Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."⁴

Mrs. Barry was not a wall-flower member of the order. Her membership afforded her opportunities to work, and this purpose was discovered by her sister toilers; and, as a consequence, in a few months after her initiation, she was made Master Workman of Local Assembly 3,636, composed exclusively of women; the first Woman's Local organized west of New York City, having a membership of 980 strong. At the head of such an assembly Mrs. Barry sought and found opportunities to be of service to her sister associates in factory life. Her moral sensibilities revolted at the gross disregard of proper arrangements for the sexes in the factory building, and a sweeping reform was at once inaugurated. This done, a class of young girls of the assembly was formed for instruction. This movement was a success from the first and was productive of lasting benefits.

As might be expected, the brave and aggressive woman represented her Local Assembly in the District Assembly, No. 65, and this District Assembly, sent her as a delegate to the General Assembly of the order, which convened at Richmond, Virginia, in 1886. At this General Assembly, Mrs. Barry stood forth, the thoroughly equipped champion of working women. Their condition was her theme, and her burning words aroused the delegates to a sense of its transcendent importance. There was ignorance and degradation to be overcome. The work of education and elevation demanded the largest possible measure of effort on the part of the order. Thousands of working women throughout the land were pleading for assistance. Men were cruel, heartless, and in numerous instances lustful and corrupting. She painted the picture as she had seen it: haggard and debasing, and as a result, in Richmond she was appointed to the responsible position of **General Instructor and Director of Woman's Work** of the order of **Knights of Labor**.

So far, this sketch of Mrs. Barry reads like a romance. We found her a happy, joyous, thoughtless girl, at her home in Pierrepont, St. Lawrence County, New York. We have accompanied her along her pathway of happiness, sorrow, gloom, and poverty and found her always hopeful, always self-reliant and courageous, always sympathetic,

⁴ From *Ruth*, chapter 1, verse 16, which reads: "And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

and devising plans for the improvement of the condition of working women. We have seen her a mere child, taking charge of a school, leaving the home of her childhood to earn her own living. We have seen her young heart crushed with great grief, when the "old arm chair" lost its occupant, and a mother's voice no longer blessed her child. We have seen her a bride at the altar, and again bowed beneath a great bereavement and required to enter the ranks of toilers, to support herself and children, always courageous and self-reliant, always hopeful and determined.

We have seen Mrs. Barry in recognition of her zeal and superior abilities, made General Instructor and Director of Woman's Work of Knights of Labor, an office accepted with a "pang," because it meant the "breaking up of her tenement home and separation from her treasures." But the home was broken up, and the "treasures," her two boys left to the care of others, that the heroic woman might go forth on her mission of love and redemption, to the oppressed of her sex.

In her first report to the order, we hear her say:

Within the jurisdiction of our District Assemblies, starvation and sin are knocking at, aye, and have gained entrance at the doors of thousands of the victims of underpaid labor. And the men who have pledged themselves to the assistance of humanity and the abolition of poverty, are so engrossed in the pursuit of their own ambitious desires, that upon their ears the wail of woe falls unheeded, and the work of misery and destruction still goes on.

Men! Ye, whose earnings count from \$9 to \$15 a week and upward; cease, in the name of God and humanity, cease your demands and grievances, and give us your assistance for a time to bring some relief to the poor unfortunate, whose week's work of 84 hours brings but \$2.50 or \$3 per week.

* * *

Once more we appeal to you, brothers of the Knights of Labor, by your love for the sacred name of mother, by your protecting love and respect for your wives and daughters, to sustain your manly principles, to uphold the dignity of your strong, noble, manhood, and assist to uproot the corrupt system that is making slaves — not alone of poverty, but slaves to sin and shame — of those who, by the right of divine parentage, we must call sisters.

Such were the ringing words of Mrs. Barry to the delegates of the order of Knights of Labor. They are bravo, clarion-tongued words,

worthy of a heroine, worthy of the cause she represents; they are words fitly spoken, "like apples of gold in pictures of silver."⁵ It would be well if all working men, no matter under what banner they march, could hear them, and better if they would ponder their import.

In the same report Mrs. Barry gives the enslaving prices at which women work to make clothing for men, and which, to gain coarse and scanty food, subjects wee infants to toil, and says:

To any honest man, I say, when you purchase an overcoat, see to it that the maker got more than 40 cents for making it; when you buy pants, do not touch those that were made for 50 cents per dozen, or vests for 15 cents each, or a shirt for 3, 4, and 6 cents each. * * * An honest man's back is not the place for a dishonestly manufactured article.

Such words are keynotes, and should inspire those who hear them with a determination to emancipate women from the curse which men, more cruel than a Nero, a Tiberius, or a Caligula, visit upon them. We talk glibly of the devastation of a Timour, a Nadir Shaw, and an Alexander; there are no bounds to imprecations heaped upon those who steal savages from the jungles of Africa; but Mrs. Barry recites the curses of slavery heaped upon women, productive of poverty and starvation, sin and shame, not in the land of the crescent, not inflicted by turbaned Turks, but in the land of the cross, inflicted by Christian (?) men. God save the mark.

Again in 1888, Mrs. Barry, in her report, gives an account of her travels that embraced the continent, and says:

It has been intimated that the Woman's Department was started on sentiment. Well, if so, it has turned out to be one of the most thoroughly practical departments in the order. * * * Ten thousand organized women today look to the Woman's department for counsel, advice and assistance.

There can be no higher evidence of man's civilization than is shown in his regard for the welfare of women; and a woman's department in all the ranks of organized labor demonstrates the fact, as nothing else could demonstrate it. that the workingmen of America stand upon a plane of moral and intellectual culture as high as that occupied by those whose supercilious airs indicate that they are "re-

⁵ From *Proverbs*, chapter 25, verse 11.

specters of persons,” and therefore a little higher than Jehovah, whom Peter said is “no respecter of persons.”⁶ But it should be said of Mrs. Barry that in demanding the amelioration of the condition of women, she grasps the whole subject and treats it with profound philosophic acumen. Speaking of reforms demanded, she would have a reduced number of hours of work for women, because:

Long hours, constant toil, confinement, injurious sanitary conditions, uncomfortable home surroundings and lack of proper nourishment, are killing the vital, physical, and mental strength so necessary to women, the mothers to whom a nation must look for her strength of manhood and womanhood in future generations.

As this imperfect sketch goes to the printer, the subject of it is doing the work of an evangelist, organizing, instructing and cheering on women-workers to put forth their united energies to better their condition. In every philanthropic enterprise there will be times and occasions when deferred hopes will dampen the ardor of the stoutest hearts; but battles for the right when once begun, though baffled oft, like Tennyson’s brook, go on forever.

This *Magazine* wishes Mrs. Barry the realization of her fondest hopes, and that long before her knightly voice is silenced, victory may flash along all the lines of organized labor; a victory for women as well as for men; a victory so crushing to the oppressors of working women that the women, like Miriam and all the women delivered from the hands of Pharaoh, shall take their timbrels and sing, “Labor hath triumphed gloriously over a nefarious gang of oppressors, and working women, emancipated, disenthralled, and redeemed, are free.”⁷

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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First Edition.

⁶ From *Acts*, chapter 10, verses 34-35, which reads: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.

⁷ Allusion to *Exodus*, chapter 15, verse 20, which reads: “And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.”