

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a book published in 1884 called *Death and Disease Behind the Counter*, meaning the shop counter. The writer, Thomas Sutherst, is appalled by the conditions shop assistants have to cope with in their jobs, particularly as they tend to be young people, and he included statements from shop assistants in the book. This section is about the effects of having to stand up for long hours.

Death and Disease Behind the Counter

The most exhausting incident, however, of shop work is the long, long, standing. I do not contend that it would be either possible or convenient for assistants to sit and discharge their duties, nor should I wish to see them do so, because to stand and walk about a shop cannot
5 of itself be considered as a very arduous occupation, provided there were regular times set apart and kept sacred for rest and refreshment, and that the hours of standing were not so many. The view in which standing is regarded by shopkeepers themselves is plainly apparent from the solicitude* they show for the comfort of their customers by providing seats for purchasers. It is undoubtedly more agreeable to sit and select what is required than to
10 stand, but so far as there is an actual and pressing need of rest as between the assistants and the purchasers, it appears to me that the seats are at the wrong side of the counter. A little more solicitude in this direction for the young men and women behind the counter would, I am sure, not only be profitable to the employers, but would be appreciated substantially by considerate purchasers. The wasting fatigue resulting from standing
15 scarcely needs any illustration, for almost everyone knows from experience that there are few more painful sensations than the feeling of complete exhaustion which prostrates the whole system after even a comparatively short period of standing. What then must be the state of those whose lot* it is to stand for the lengthened periods already mentioned? We know that incessant walking for twenty-four hours was considered one of the most
20 unbearable tortures to which witches in former times were subjected, for the purpose of compelling them to own their guilt, and that few of them could hold out for twelve hours. If this was regarded as a cruel torture at a period in the history of our country when we were less civilised, the advancement we have made has availed little to the shop-assistant, who in these days is obliged to submit to the intolerable fatigue of standing for periods, varying
25 according to the locality, from thirteen to seventeen hours a day.

[...]

It is the wasting unbearable standing, the inadequate time for meals, and the vitiated atmosphere that do the mischief, causing a sense of dullness and monotony, without the
30 gleam of a hope of relief before a very late hour. It is surprising they are unfit to do anything except go to bed exhausted in body and depressed in mind, when their only prospect is to be subjected on the morrow to the same wearying, pitiless round. [...] The rosy cheeks and round full face speedily become pale and emaciated*. The features sharpen, and the complexion assumes a yellow, unhealthy tinge. The eyes part with their lustre and shew the ominous sinking and darkness. The expression loses its sparkling vivacity and becomes

35 stolid and sad. The legs swell, the back aches, and innumerable internal complaints supervene.

[...]

Ernest A. G., age 22, Clerkenwell, E.C. Grocer's assistant. [...] I was in very good health when first I started in business, but did not continue so long, being very unwell for about three months, and am now not nearly so strong as I used to be. I have often felt dead beat
40 up with the long standing, and my poor legs have swollen much through it. My mind and body get thoroughly worn out, and I soon find my way to my bed when I leave the shop [...] I have known a great many bad effects from the long standing and long hours. Young fellows come up from the country looking the picture of health, and in about six months' time they fade away, looking more like corpses than healthy young men, what they were once. In fact
45 all their spirit is knocked out of them.

Glossary

- * solicitude – care and concern
- * lot – luck, situation or destiny
- * emaciated – abnormally thin or weak

This extract is from Thomas Sutherst, *Death and Disease Behind the Counter* (1884) and the full text can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/b28058252>.

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