

The FACTORY GIRL AS SHE IS and IS NOT

BEING the Story of an Intimate Inquiry Into the Life of the Young Woman Who Is Erroneously Supposed To Be the Most Downtrodden of Her Sex

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I HAVE been a factory girl in six different factories. I have worked side by side with the factory hands. I have shared their lot, gained the confidence of many and am prepared to prove by intimate personal knowledge that their lives, far from being the wretched, colorless ones that are generally presented to view, are practically care free and replete with optimism, while the stunted, emaciated, hollow chested, sad eyed worker is a myth pure and simple.

My first venture was in a boys' shirt waist factory. I applied to the superintendent for work. After asking a few general questions he referred me to the forewoman, who promptly found a place for me. Asking what compensation I would receive she told me it depended entirely on myself, work being paid by the piece.

Right here, let me say, is the root of the low wage problem. Girls make what they earn. Many, if they would, could earn much more than they do, but it is hardly fair to blame the employers for not paying for unperformed work. In this factory good workers

made in their behalf, resent rules made for their protection and in the matter of property are vandals. They waste their employer's materials, are untidy in their habits and positively blind to disorder and confusion. All the factories in which I spent my time were light, airy, clean and provided with modern conveniences, all of which the girls accepted with condensation untempered with appreciation.

One day I ventured to reprove a girl for an especially uncalled for waste of material. "What do I care?" she retorted, "the boss can afford it; if I'd got half the money he has I'd never work. Mind your business. Ain't you got troubles of your own?" But this is the exception. The girls are nearly all inclined to be friendly and accept kindly admonition in the spirit it is given.

Sitting next to me in the embroidery factory was a girl whose profanity and coarseness were appalling. "Why do you use such language?" I asked her. "Don't you realize it injures you in the eyes of your associates? Such expressions do not emphasize your conversation; they merely degrade you. Don't you think so yourself?"

Coloring deeply, she answered:—"I just don't think. I'm used to hearing it and say it as it comes to me, but I'll try to be more careful." And she kept her word, for I heard no more vulgarity from her lips.

In some of the workrooms talking is permitted provided the privilege is not abused, but moderation being an unknown quantity to these young persons, they keep up a babble that must be sorely trying to the forewoman, if her repeated cry for "less noise" has any meaning. As four or five languages are sometimes spoken at once, one has a very clear perception of conditions at the time of the arrested building of the Tower of Babel.

When one considers the restricted atmosphere of their home environment it is not surprising that the conversation indulged in is rapid in the extreme, consisting mainly of reference to callow youths, the latest styles in hats and dresses or the newest effects in hairdressing. The wonderful and elaborate structures of tow and hair the girls rear upon their heads are convincing proof of physical endurance, for the heat and weight of these coiffures must be most distressing.

Education Neglected.

Some of the girls are fairly well educated, that is, they have a grammar school training. One told me she went to high school for a term, but this is the exception. Most of them go to work far too soon, and a very small percentage attend evening school. They all have working papers, for no employer will hire a girl who cannot furnish them, but I am inclined to think the parents of many had been sadly tangled concerning the dates of their children's births, some appearing to me not over ten, but on this point the parents, not the employers, are at fault. None the less, even these juvenile workers were healthy and contented, several I questioned confiding to me they much preferred work to school.

Some firms strictly prohibit eating during working hours, others permit it at all times. In the latter cases the girls begin to eat as soon as they arrive and continue until they leave. And the mixtures they devour! The awful gastronomic combinations they devour! How they digest the amount, to say nothing



Spent Much Time Before the Mirror

earned from \$10 to \$12 a week, in exceptional cases teaching \$15 to \$18.

I next worked in a handkerchief factory. Here the work was harder, inasmuch as most of it had to be performed while standing, but seats were provided, and any girl could perform her task seated for at least a portion of the time.

The handkerchief factory is a world of its own. To the uninitiated the many pairs of hands through which a handkerchief goes before it reaches the shipping department is almost incredible, and where there are so many grades it is to be expected the wages will vary according to the quality of the work turned out, but I could learn of nobody earning below \$5 a week.

In a feather factory reliable and steady willow makers earn as much as \$14 a week, \$7 being the lowest amount I heard of, excepting learners, who receive \$3 a week while learning. In the dull season, about three months during the year, the wages are lower, pompons and a cheaper grade of feathers being made from the tops and stumps of the used fies.

In an embroidery factory wages ranged from \$6 to \$10 a week. The lower sum is an insignificant wage, but I venture to assert that unless factory work were paid by the piece the employers would promptly face bankruptcy proceedings.

They Earn No More.

Being so paid, it is true that in some instances girls do not earn more than from \$5 to \$6 a week, but these I found were girls who were indifferent workers, girls who spent much time before the mirror and wasted as much more with their rouge and powder rag; those who dawdled their time away, who talked incessantly and who came late and left early, for piece work is the least confining of any work I know, and piece operators come and go at their own sweet will, almost any excuse sufficing for the forewoman, providing the work she requires is ready when she calls for it.

For the girls without parents living on such restricted amounts is naturally a difficult problem, but I found that those who are dependent on their own exertions and entirely self-supporting develop a sense of responsibility and early reach the higher grade of wages. Of poverty in its abject form, as I have so often heard it described, I saw absolutely no signs.

My experiences in the different factories that employed me were almost identical, my associates of one calibre—crude, care-free, irresponsible.

That the freedom from care, the unrestricted, happy-go-lucky life they lead, may and in many instances undoubtedly does work to their disadvantage is undeniably true.

Many girls are lazy, shiftless and ignorant. No matter how lenient the rules and comfortable the surroundings repented "knocking" of the employer seems to be his inevitable fate. They regard him as their arch enemy and apparently have no sense of responsibility toward him. They are unappreciative of efforts

of the material, will always remain a mystery to me, but that they do assimilate it and thrive upon it is irrefutable, for taken en masse they are healthy, clear eyed, well developed and vigorous, far indeed from being the lean, emaciated creatures I had expected to meet.

One morning as one of the girls left the elevator she opened her satchel and, taking from it a sandwich of frankfurters and pickles, commenced to eat with a gusto that was positively refreshing to witness, if not to inhale.

"Did you come away without your breakfast?" I asked.

"I had breakfast all right," she answered, evidently surprised at my question.

"How, then, can you eat again so soon?" I persisted.

"I'm hungry again, that's why," she replied in apparent indignation. "I say, Becky," she cried, discarding one of her chosen spirits, "this one (pointing to me) wants to know why I'm eating. I tell her I'm hungry."



My First Venture Was in a Boys' Shirt Waist Factory



Here Tea and Coffee Can Be Had for Two Cents a Cup



The much vaunted beauty of the factory girl is an mythical as her oppression. Many are not even passably good looking; others have a cheap, insignificant prettiness, and perhaps five per cent, if well groomed and turned out by a capable modiste, would be attractive, but of the hundreds I saw not one could lay claim to positive beauty. They are, with few exceptions, below medium height, and so overdeveloped that the curves of youth and grace are lost in adipose. To their detriment they are addicted to the use of cosmetics, which they apply most fanatically, defeating the ends they seek to acquire. Cheap and flashy jewelry they also affect in profusion.

Home lovers they are not, despising everything pertaining to housekeeping. They look upon marriage as a means to the attainment of what they believe will be a life of irresponsibility and indolence. As wives and mothers I am inclined to think they will prove miserable failures.

Caring for Them.

When they are ill or ailing the forewoman insists on the patient resting in a retiring room set apart for that purpose, and if the indisposition is sufficiently serious the girl is sent home in charge of another, whose car fare is paid and whose loss of time is assumed by the firm. By such tokens may we not rest assured that the well being of her hands is a matter of some solicitude to the employer?

In the matter of dress the girls are entirely imitative. Fashion is their divinity. Few of them have any aptitude for sewing, and those that make their own clothes are of a very small minority. The ready to wear suits, hats and waists are purchased by them, inferiority of material, make and workmanship not being factors that appeal to them; hence they pay the highest prices, not realizing how much they could save in money and gain in effect and quality if they would cultivate the use of the needle. Questioning a girl on this one day, she explained that she had no time to sew.

"Does your mother never help you make your clothes?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she replied; "mother can't sew any better than I can, nor can my married sister; and what's the use of sewing, anyway, when you can buy things all ready to put on so cheap, without any bother or fussing or trying on and altering?"

In writing an article of this description it must be borne in mind that in describing the factory girl as I found her I am compelled to generalize. There were individual cases where the girls were the opposite of my generalization—girls who eschewed the exaggerations of fashion, girls in whom innate refinement, gentle speech and a keen sense of responsibility toward their employers stood out with Alpine clearness, but they were rare exceptions.

A word concerning the forewomen may not be out of place. They are often represented as hard task masters and indifferent to the well being of those under their care. There may be some such, but if so I was singularly fortunate in those I met. They were uniformly kind, considerate and in some cases overindulgent.

Taken all in all I found life in a factory a not un pleasant one, considering the social and mental limitations of its followers. With board and lodging the domestic servant earns more money, but she sacrifices the liberty, the social equality, the recreation, the change and above all, the carelessness that her factory sister enjoys. The attainment of happiness as we view it from our individual standpoint is, after all, the inalienable right of all of us, and of happiness as she understands it I do not hesitate to say the factory girl has full measure.

shows. They sing the newest songs, take vacations and excursions during the summer, skate in winter and disport themselves generally as normal girls are apt to do. To dancing they are devoted. The contemplated placing of dance halls under municipal protection is a step in the right direction; its consummation cannot come too soon.

When Jealousy Comes.

Of the green eyed monster they are pathetic victims. In factories where a large office force is maintained their jealousy of its personnel would be amusing were it not pregnant with spite and malice, but where this jealousy existed I found that it had its redemptive qualities, inasmuch as it demonstrated a desire to attain something higher than their present status, though they lacked the ability and application necessary to arrive there.

Hearing a fracas one noontime, I investigated and discovered that one of the typewriters and a factory hand were having an altercation concerning the misplacement of some article of wearing apparel.

Asking the factory girl what the trouble was, she turned savagely on me, exclaiming:—

"Trouble! Do you think I'd let her trouble me? Take it from me, there's no trouble, but because she can thump a typewriter she needn't think she's got anything on me."

Of current events, the girls are lamentably ignorant, even the smattering they acquire from the occasional perusal of a daily newspaper or from conversation with others equally uninformed being garbled and distorted. Magazines they never read. I doubt whether the names of those that are household words are even known to them. Worldly wise, yet unsophisticated, they lack poise and adaptability, and though brimming over with tawdry sentiment and cheap emotion, they are incapable of real sensibility. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, they are bedged with an overwhelming sense of self-respect, and the girl whose personality suggests inferiority is a rare exception. I questioned many, and one and all were unequivocally respectful concerning the hysterical outbursts so often made in their behalf.