Manuscript: What a Factory Can Teach a Housewife

Tarbell, Ida M.

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When one set of people see that another set of people are taking from them that which they very much want to have, the intelligent procedure is to find the reasons behind the shift. The housewives of this country are seeing the great body of girls and women on whom they have always depended for household service turn their backs on them and accept employment in thousands of different kinds of shops and factories. They see the girl that they think they ought to secure as a waitress much preferring to go into a candy factory. They find the woman that they think would make an admirable cook possibly making munitions, if she lives in Dayton, Ohio, for instance. This shift from the house to the factory is not local and sporadic. It is general and permanent.

There are of course reasons. Now what are the reasons? What the household employers in this country ought to do is to study carefully why the manufacturers can hold labor when they cannot. The factory has no way of compelling girls and women to come to it. They go, it is obvious, because they prefer it. Why do they prefer it?

Most housewives have traditional notions of the factory as something cruel, dark, distressing. They are appalled that any woman should prefer to go into these places, of which they have such horror, but is their notion correct? Take the woman who might be the cook. Why does she go to a factory? It is not at all because she does not want to cook. It is because she does want a regular day of a fixed number of hours. It is because she does want her Sundays and holidays. It is because she wants a fixed task, which she can perform without the hourly fussing and
intrusion of a person who, because she is in authority, is unwilling to let her whom she hires go ahead and do her work in her own way. It is because she can have a home, a place which is her own, to which she can give her personal stamp, where she can be more independent, more cheerful, more of a person than she can in the home that is provided by the housewife.

The woman prefers the factory too because she finds that her employer and those who are immediately over her, show her and her work more respect than the housewife does. She can weave or spin, she can run a lathe or feed a machine, and the policeman on the beat will not look down on her, as he so often does if she is in a kitchen. She keeps caste in the factory, as she cannot keep it in the house. The women of this country are never going to be able to hold household workers until they offer the same physical and social advantages that the factory does. There never was a clearer demonstration that money has less influence with the mass of people than opportunities for a free life and for social standing. The woman makes more money in the average household. Her weekly wage may not be quite as large as that of the factory, but what she saves brings the earnings up considerably above that of the highest paid factory workers. It is with her a question of self respect, a question of freedom, a question of opportunity to advance, to take and make a place for herself in the community.

Socially and economically speaking the housewives of the United States are back in the 18th Century, and not the 18th century of the revolutionary France and revolutionary America, but the feudal 18th century. They see this thing from an aristocratic point of view, not from the democratic. Until they purge
themselves of the class spirit, until they go out and study why
the manufacturer is able to hold the labor which they want, and
are willing to transform their spirit and their methods, and
are ready to adopt his spirit and his methods, they are not going
to be able to stabilize and dignify the great industry which they
control. They can learn what it is necessary to do from the
factory. Not long ago I stumbled upon an admirable illustration
of this. The owner of a factory died, leaving his business to
his wife. She had scarcely ever in his life passed the door of
the plant. Now she was obliged to acquaint herself with its con-
dition. She found it in debt. To save the property, she was ob-
ligated to give attention to it. She went at the task with great
energy and in ten years has built up a factory which is in every
way a model. She discovered at once that in order to hold the kind
of labor which she needed she would be obliged to offer better
hours, higher wages, better conditions than her predecessors. She
built up a labor force where contentment and cooperation reign.
She had been put a few years at this work when she began to ask
herself, "Why can I hold these people better than I can my cook
and maids? Her factory experience enabled her to answer the
question. She offered in the factory a life more in accordance with
natural human wants than she did in her kitchen. She resolved
to revolutionize her house and put the labor there on the same
basis as labor in the factory. The result more than justified the
experiment. She keeps her cook and her maids. They cooperate with
her as her operatives in the factory cooperate. The result she
claims is revolutionary in its spirit and its satisfactions. Some-
thing like this every woman must do if she is to hold labor.