Notes for Chapter 9 (IX-1): Women in Industry

1. Numbers and Stakes

Tarbell, Ida M.

http://hdl.handle.net/10456/38381

©Allegheny College. All rights reserved.

All materials in the Allegheny College DSpace Repository are subject to college policies and Title 17 of the U.S. Code.
Amidst all the transformations we have seen in these hard and stern years of war, none has been more marvellous than that which has taken place in the life of woman. There was at first a goodly number of charming ladies, elegant, stylish, well-gloved and well shod, accustomed only to look after their own clothing or their own grooming, or at most with theatres and receptions, who had been cajoled, spoiled, flattered because of their beautiful clothes, their good looks and their frivolity.

There was also a larger number of good mothers, of sturdy housewives, used to thinking only of home, husband and children, dear sweet caretakers, whose horizon was limited to the edge of their nest.

There was a much smaller number, fortunately, the men, of intellectual women who occupied themselves with the problems of feminine life, who spoke in Congresses, wrote in the journals, demanded their rights.

There was still left an enormous mass of the poor, the common classes, the working women, small employees, the peasants, all accustomed to submit without opposition to masculine domination, to offer humbly in case of need their own wages to carry on the house, with
work little regarded and miserably paid.

Over all this, of a sudden, flashed the red flame of war and all is changed prodigiously. The elegant little ladies, the speakers before congress, and the grave housewives are often found united around a hospital bed, have developed a fraternal spirit, and have the only pronounced word common to their languages so diverse,—The word of active devotion; mothers and wives who lived only for husbands and sons have seen them leave for war and have found the power to give themselves without lamenting to their country that needed them; wives have succeeded of business men, wives of peasants, to the surprise of others as well as themselves, in administering and carrying on the business and the estate of their husbands.

In Italy,

New professions for women outlined themselves, such as running the tramways, sweeping the streets and serving as barbers; a flood of employes, correspondents and accountants in petticoats, have peacefully invaded the offices deserted by men, and the rights which come thus, proudly forbidden to the women when they demanded them with cries and sharp demands of suffragism, today come as if offered, with the respect inspired by all good work, which in the hour of supreme danger they have known how to accomplish.

The first to organize was the Army of Mercy,
"Who were found

'The Legion of Angels', in the tiny hospitals, in the
field tents, under the hissing menace of hostile grenades,
as well as in the hospital trains racing in rapid course
their sacred burden of pain; In the great city hospitals,
extensive, well-organized, large as barracks and warm as
houses, wheresoever they are, they accomplish the task
which is set before them, with a zeal unexhausted, with
sensible simplicity. They wash wounds, support broken
limbs, assist at terrible operations, bind up frightful
wounds. The heart trembles but not the hand.

Others who could not endure the fatigue and the
sight of suffering, have gone to work in the posts of
comfort, at which such a great number of soldiers have
been aided; the meeting places of the roads, which trans-
port by the thousand from one place to another of the
Peninsula, soldiers who start for the front, soldiers who
go on leave, the wounded transferred from one hospital to
another.

Jumping down from the train, all dusty and
thirsty, dragging sometimes an injured leg, the soldier
finds himself received with a pleasant smile, with a
gentle look, and finds, according to his wish, the good
coffee boiling hot or the foaming ice which is refreshing
even to look at; and finds a good word, a woman's voice
which recalls to him other dear voices, and gives to him
And while these kindly works go on, a swift and endless procession of needles goes on throughout the country, and seems like a light and continuous accompaniment to the terrific majesty of the music of cannon. Who has not worked on stockings in these years? Where is the circle of women either organized for diversion or study that does not boast of its large output, of its great work for the army in the way of giving warm clothes, in which, according to the word of the poet, the warmth of the heart has been woven stitch by stitch?

Many, many other beneficial and patriotic deeds have been actuated by the daring, fervor and good-will of the women. The business of giving information, a work of such practical utility and so exciting, was undertaken by many. In every city tens of men and women have given themselves to this work, were ready hour by hour to write letters, give explanations, collect and distribute schedules and notes: an anxious crowd collected continuously about the offices, a thousand letters were to be written, a thousand replies flow in; one must follow for months the traces of someone who has disappeared, with the attention and skill of a Sherlock Holmes turned to do a kindly deed,
one must revive faith in someone ignorant and disconsolate, comfort whoever still hopes, seek to console with a kindly word, ah, sad mission, those who can hope no more, and succeed in turn in bringing a bounded and unexpected joy to hearts abused.

... work for refugees! How much also has been done for these! Driven out of their country by the whirlwind of war or transported to the dreary fields of the Austrian concentration camps, many of these come without anything more than the poor clothes they have on, which on the way have been torn and worn out. There are plans to aid them and to give them plain and sanitary lodgings. There are made for them stockings and boots and thousands of garments are collected for them. Above all, there has been given to many of them that which above all they desire, with their hearts gentle but sad, work, that they may at least not be a burden to others. Has been more good works by the scores, who can keep a record of them all? In order to reeducate the mutilated and give comfort to the blind, in order to utilize anew the uniforms and the clothes of the soldiers deteriorated by use, in order to send bread to our prisoners and to prepare in the trenches anti-parasitic equipment, in order to teach the people to cook better and more economically, and in order to collect from those who have
more, gold for the country, many have been called into service.

The sole and greatest good for the poor, is to seek to take the place of those who are gone and to procure bread for themselves and their dear ones. Such work takes forms to which we grow more and more habituated. Who wonders any more at what they see in the carriages or tramways? The lady conductor with her grey cape, with a cap which gives her the air of a soldier, has become now a popular silhouette. Young or old, in their dealing with the public, they show a courtesy and eagerness which the masculine conductor did not always have, and they do not make mistakes in change. In some cities there has been entrusted to the women service on the railways; they have been given the cleaning of the trains; they sweep the floors, wash the windows, polish the brass, and do this work of domesticity for which they are better fitted than the men. Similar to this is the work of the sweepers, who, clad in the municipal uniforms, care for the cleaning of the streets in the city and its suburbs.

Women, also, occupied in attaching the notices on the white walls as advertisements spread the glue and expose the announcement with the big letters and the handsome faces in the advertisements. Women, also, are in many cities in the barber shops.

But added to these are the occupations peculiarly
feminine which give bread to the multitudes, such as the work of sewing clothes for the army. The operator runs her sewing machine, (and in case the woman does not have one the government holds three score ready somewhere in her locality) the doublets of cloth, the shirts pile up in the poor room, the sewer thinks of her husband, thinks of her son who are out there as well as those with him and the hand which guides the stuff under the needle seems to caress it in an unconscious feeling of tenderness and meanwhile he who is out there fighting, is relieved a little in spirit at reading the letters from his wife, in finding she has work, that is not badly paid, that the babies have bread and he blesses this work of kindness which renders less hard their need.

Not small wages but so large that the economist begins to be concerned about them, when they consider the lean years after the war, are those the operators in the munitions factories receive. The quicker ones are paid about five lire a day; others more intelligent and stronger sometimes reach as high as ten lire a day.