

Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19 Street

Women as "Honest" Grafters

A quizzical and daring Midwest columnist writes that at a gathering of ladies in his town to discuss law enforcement, the president of the league, who had just returned from Europe, entertained her guests before calling the meeting to order by showing a number of beautiful gowns which, she gleefully boasted, she had been able to bring in, duty free. This entertainment over, the meeting was called to order and there was a severe arraignment of nullificationists.

Many an ocean traveler could match this skit from personal experiences with ardent advocates of prohibition law enforcement, whose deep concern on the voyage was how to get their foreign purchases in without paying duty.

A mockery of the situation is that many of the most successful of these smugglers are beneficiaries of the tariff. I have heard a custom house official, made cynical by experience, declare that the women who require closest watching are those made rich by a highly protected industry. Apparently they think if the government takes care of them so liberally in one way it should in all ways. They are an ironical parallel to the

columnist's ladies who began their tea party in support of law enforcement by rejoicing over law evasion.

The bad logic and bad morals of these exhibits can be laughed off as specimens of human inconsistency, but they have too real a bearing on the serious question of what we are to expect from women in making and administering laws, to be dismissed with a cynical "That's that." Nor can we fairly escape by pointing out the similar inconsistencies of men - men who vote 'dry' and live 'wet', men who are the master smugglers, not dallying with mere articles of personal and home adornment like women but carrying on big and lucrative trades in forbidden goods. These facts in no way change the quality of the women's logic and morals; they remain just as bad and absurd, and they take the life out of that argument for giving women votes-and sincerely believed - the argument that she would purify politics because inherently so much more honest than men, also so inexperienced in grafting and favoritism that she would neither understand nor be able to adapt herself to the widespread subtle practices that go on under the head of "honest graft." That is, women were to purify politics through their very innocence.

Women who argued that their sex knew nothing of the gentle art of grafting overlooked the vicious system of handling household and personal expenses under which the average American

woman has lived for generations - and still does in some quarters - a system not only inherently humiliating but inherently dishonest.

As heads of households they were obliged to spend money constantly; probably the bulk of their husband's income was directly or indirectly spent by them. But they did not know what a budget meant, they had no ideas about living within an income. They had to ask for every dollar - a humiliating condition that probably has been the cause of as much domestic unhappiness in this country as any other one thing. There are few of us who have lived to be fifty or over that cannot remember seeing a woman almost in hysterics because she must ask her husband for money. Almost universally among the well-to-do class the charge system prevailed - and still does. Women run up bills at the butcher's, the baker's, the candlestick maker's, the dry goods store, the flower shop. I have known women of wealth who could run up bills into the thousands of dollars and yet who rarely had five dollars in their purses.

Now, what is the inevitable effect on a woman in this situation? She runs up her bills recklessly, generally without considering prices. The end of the month when these bills come in is a dreadful moment. When she knows she has seriously over-run, she sticks a bill in the back of a drawer, hoping that next month she can economize and will later dare present it.

Another habit born of this unsound practice has grown up among women of various classes, particularly women of wealth. Shop keepers, tailors, dress makers, come to know those of their customers who do not handle their own money. They have been known to give a woman a commission on the very gown that she bought. The price is \$100 - it is billed to her husband at \$110. She gets the \$10. She is doing, however, just what the cook in her kitchen is doing. The cook arranges with a butcher to give all her orders to him if he will give her a percentage. It is one of the commonest practices of servants in households where a woman has not ^{an} allowance to which she rigidly holds expenditures.

The woman who practices these evasions and makeshifts rarely understands why her husband is angry when he discovers them. She does not know that if he found a business associate doing what she does it would quickly lead to separation perhaps prosecution. In his code his wife is dishonest. In her code he is unkind, unfair, and that is, to a degree, true, for he does not reflect that no business associate would tolerate the situation into which he forces his wife.

Tens of thousands of the girls who annually go into one kind or another of business in this country go from homes where these more or less unsound, unfair and dishonest practices in handling the domestic budget prevail. It is inevitable that

these girls have a blunted sense of meum and tuum. They go into offices which, five times out of ten, are honeycombed with small graft. They do as they see others doing. My first realization that one must individually watch her steps in an office if she did not wish to become a petty grafter, was when I discovered myself using office stamps on personal letters! It came to me with a sudden shock that I was stealing. This realization not only made me watchful of myself but of others. I think it may safely be said that in hundreds of offices in this country, where there is no scientific system of handling supplies, employees keep themselves and their friends in pencils, pads, stationery, and frequently postage stamps. I have known of a sheet of ~~six~~^{one} hundred postage stamps being presented to a friend by a young woman in charge of office supplies. If you had told this girl she was stealing she would have been horrified, she belonged to the office - you had your perquisites, naturally. I am told it is a fact that many business men never buy stamped envelopes, although they are more convenient because grafting employees make it too expensive.

It is not always the underling that is at fault. This pilfering is not infrequently encouraged by a purchasing agent who gets his little commission on supplies - the larger the order, the larger the commission, and he encourages those under him to use for their own purposes the pads, pencils, etc., which belong to the establishment. Worse, he involves them in his

grafting until they become, in spite of themselves, his protectors.

All this is petty - a matter of cents, a few dollars at most; but let the practitioners advance - find positions in institutions where the purchasing and distributing runs into tens of thousands or more dollars, laxly supervised, and the thieving goes on, involves associates, grows almost by necessity, once established, until discovery overtakes it, with the inevitable disgrace though probably not in most cases public scandal. It is "hushed up" for the good of the college, church, hospital, "home."

Such is the school in which tens of thousands of young women in their struggles for economic independence are getting their ideas of the way things are done in the active world. How can we expect a woman, familiar in private and business life with such practices, to be shocked when she comes upon them in public life. She naturally gravitates there to that considerable group found in every party - conservative, liberal, radical - always on the lookout for what they can get out of it. To them every election, every department, every new undertaking of the government, is a legitimate field for exploitation. When efficiency, the good of the public, the sacredness of law is urged, their answer is, "Let us talk patronage."

It was these long-known, long-fought political boodlers that women were to overwhelm, put out of business. The idealistic suffragist spurned the idea that there would be women ready to strengthen their ranks.

It is high time that the great body of fine women political leaders in this country realized that they have other obligations to their sex than teaching how the laws are made and repealed and how to mark a ballot. They have a primary work to do in exposing in some kind of vivid and intelligible way to the mass of women what dishonesty in politics is; its relation to dishonesty in daily life, domestic or business, - how related it is and how certain it is that the woman whose sense of honesty has been dulled by the practices of her world, will carry on in political life quite as effectively as men do.

In the last two years we have had a warning - terrible and humiliating - of this fact - the case of Mrs. Knapp of New York State. "Let us forget Mrs. Knapp," I hear women say. Rather, let us remember her. She is a perfect example of what we are in for as long as we try to deceive ourselves by believing that a woman familiar with and accepting as a matter of course the petty grafting of domestic, business and professional life will hesitate at the "honest graft" of politics.

And what is the case of Mrs. Knapp?

It began for the American public outside - and for not a few inside - New York State in the summer of 1924, when the Republican State Convention, nominated a teacher of Syracuse, Mrs. Florence Knapp - well known locally as an adroit politician for secretary of state. The following November Mrs. Knapp was elected.

Her election was a matter of jubilation among women, in and out of the state and more than one whispered to the victorious lady, "It's only the beginning. We'll make you governor one day."

The new secretary of the state of New York began her work in a blaze of glory for her first duty was a spectacular one, swearing in the Governor. The adoring young women reporters described her as clad in "peach-colored velvet, a picture of loveliness." There were those who remarked that "It was a Knapp rather than a Smith day."

Whatever Mrs. Knapp's interest in clothes and ceremony, she was like a ^{strict} school teacher in office from the first day. "Nine o'clock in the morning is the hour at which this office opens," read the notice she ordered tacked on the door. "Please report promptly."

She hastened to make it clear to those in her department that all activities centered in her, and that she proposed to understand them all, herself perform them, unless she wished

9

to delegate them. She extended this supervision even to the signing of the thousands of routine documents which went out from her office. Her bold and vigorous signature, done in a distinctive purple ink she had adopted, was soon spread all over the State of New York.

It was not the routine work of her department that made Mrs. Knapp important, however, it was the fact that her first year in office (1925) was the year for the decennial census which New York has been taking since 1790. This really gigantic undertaking is largely in the hands of the Secretary of State, subject only to certain precedents which the experience of the past has imposed.

Mrs. Knapp attacked her problem with confidence, even eagerness, talking freely of her intention not only to make the completest enumeration that ever had been made, but do something for women as well as herself. She had the generous idea that the 7500 or more enumerators required to count the people should be women - where possible, teachers. The politicians took care of that. The fraternity have but few ways of honestly rewarding those who aid them. They are glad enough when once in ten years there comes a chance to help a friend to fifty or one hundred extra dollars. They may be very glad, indeed, to have that extra fifty or one hundred dollars come into their own households.

They explained to Mrs. Knapp that it had been the practice to allow the district leaders of the party in power to name the enumerators. Mrs. Knapp, being eminently practical, saw the point, and cheerfully conceded that in that way the best interests of all could be served. She did insist, however, that women be given their share. Critical statisticians who have examined the New York census of 1925 with none too kindly an eye to Mrs. Knapp, declare that, in their judgment, this large use of women was wise, that they took more pride than the men did in making neat, legible and complete returns, and that it would have made for efficiency if the entire enumerating force had been women.

But counting the inhabitants was not the only business of the census which Mrs. Knapp was superintending. The largest sum ever appropriated for a state census had been given her - - \$1,200,000 - with the understanding that there should be a complete tabulation of all the information obtained in the enumeration - a tabulation which would give a complete picture of the condition and needs of the citizenship of the state.

Mrs. Knapp herself was enthusiastic over this scientific tabulation. She reported after the counting was finished in June of 1925 that she had money enough left for it. ~~She~~ ^{She} promised that it should be something that would be of inestimable value, particularly to welfare agencies, but a few months later those

interested in census tabulation received a body blow, the work must be suspended, Mrs. Knapp announced, for lack of funds.

Now, running out of funds in a large, at least semi-political undertaking, the expense of which it is difficult to forecast because it comes only once in ten years, ^{and} must be put through in a short period of time by untrained people, is not, in itself, astonishing. What was astonishing was the casual way in which the secretary of state made her announcement, and the large sum \$300,000. which she told the legislature would be necessary if the work was to be properly completed.

Mrs. Knapp, however, was not to have an opportunity to handle this sum even if it were voted for at the end of her term, January 1927, she ~~was~~ retired from office. Though out of office, she was by no means out of public life. Indeed she went back to her home one of the few conspicuous political figures among the women of the county, her state followers on all sides continuing to whisper in her ear, "We'll make you governor."

And once governor, what might not happen. The governorship of New York has always been one of the roads to the White House. It is inevitable that one day a woman will be President of the United States, why should it not be Florence Knapp? She had played her part as she conceived men played theirs in politics - had used her influence as she conceived they used theirs - taken

her perquisites as they did - been quite "regular." She had the right, as she saw things, to count on a future under their protection. She apparently thought it mattered very little to her fellow politicians that she had left the census hanging in midair - her great job incomplete - in spite of the great sum with which she had been entrusted. And she no doubt was right in so thinking.

But Florence Knapp had left out of her calculations the burning interest certain non-official - non-political people took in the results of her census tabulation. One of these people began to look closely into the way she had spent her money. He had not been long at this self-imposed task when he ran upon what looked like evidence of something which he had not suspected,— and that a considerable sum at least of Mrs. Knapp's money had been handled in an out-and-out illegal way. The gentleman did not keep still about his suspicion. The State was soon buzzing with it - and buzzing louder because at the same time came a rumor that Mrs. Knapp when she left Albany at the end of her term, had ordered sent after her all of the pay rolls, cards and memoranda connected with the taking of the census - documents belonging of course not to her but to her office.

An investigation was undertaken and when a report was made in September 1927 it bristled with charges of "non-feasance," "mis-feasance" and "mal-feasance," backed by apparent proofs.

The one in the multitude which struck the casual reader hardest was that after work on the census had been shut down entirely for lack of funds in September 1926, Mrs. Knapp had gone on paying salaries to various people, The majority of these people ~~were~~ members of her own family; no one of them ^{so} far as could be discovered had ever done any census work and some of them ~~were~~ not residents of the State.

And there was something still more startling: apparent proof that Mrs. Knapp had, throughout her term, been signing people's names to vouchers and checks, without proper authorization. This might never have been noticed if it had not been for the purple ink. It was hardly likely that all her friends and relatives used purple ink.

The report of the investigation was laid before the Governor of the State, Alfred E. Smith. I doubt if Governor Smith in his entire eight years of service received a more unwelcome document. The man hated inefficiency and dishonesty, and this looked like both. Then the charges concerned a woman, and since the granting of the suffrage, no man in public office had done so much as he had to help women to play a useful part as public servants. He had had unusual success in his many appointments, There was, too, a disturbing political angle - Mrs. Knapp was a Republican and he a Democrat. Any notice that he would take of the report was bound to be met by the cry that

she, poor woman, was a victim of his brutal partisanship. But Governor Smith, though he undoubtedly detested his duty, did not shirk it. No more did the Attorney-General who, being a Republican, would probably have preferred a live bomb on his desk to these charges against his colleague.

A commissioner, an experienced and able man, was promptly appointed to investigate the findings. Those who may have believed that the case against Mrs. Knapp would evaporate when subjected to the rigid scrutiny of an ~~expert~~ ^{disinterested} and trained investigator, were soon disabused. The case was seen to be worse than any one had believed. Not only had Mrs. Knapp diverted funds to her own pocket by skilful forgery of the names of relatives and friends, but she had paid from census moneys both her butler and her lawyer. More serious yet, she had involved subordinates associated in the work in such a way that the commissioner considered them criminally liable. The report was a terrific arraignment, making a criminal prosecution inevitable. The prosecution ended finally in April 1928, in a verdict of guilty; The crime of which Mrs. Knapp was convicted, carried a penalty of from five to ten years' imprisonment, she received but thirty days. The mildness of the sentence was but an expression of a reluctance, even sorrow, that almost without exception the men forced to deal with her case had shown.

And that, in outline, is the case of Mrs. Knapp.

How explain her? How explain a woman who, before a report drawn from official records, charging her with repeated abuses of her position of trust could smilingly wave them all aside, who could resist every effort of investigator and prosecutor to persuade her to testify, who, when she was forced to come into court by the Judge's notice that if she did not he would serve a warrant, came with lofty disdain, faced the most damning testimony with a toss of her head, and who, after the jury had brought in its verdict, could leave the court room, "still maintaining," as the correspondent of one great newspaper wrote, "the outward manner of a tolerant lady who is harrassed by a number of annoying persons."

Never for one moment did Florence Knapp face realities - never for a moment show a consciousness of guilt. She had moments of alarm, anger, even of tears, but they were incidental. She swung back quickly into self-confidence, and apparent settled conviction that it was unthinkable that she could be convicted, - she meant too much to the "cause of women" - to her party - they would not be swayed by the evidence of peccadillos like hers - "pin money" a friend called it - the 'honest graft' everybody in positions of trust enjoyed. Considering the sum which had been entrusted to her - \$1,200,000 - how small the few thousands she had taken - certainly not proportionately more than the rake-off

many a purchasing agent of an institution enjoyed in secret commissions.

Moreover, she was not the only one, as everybody knew, that had friends on the census pay roll, drawing money and doing no work. She knew, for she had found places for these persons herself. She had accepted placing them as a necessary and legitimate part of her political duty. It might not be true that these members of the assembly, these gentlemen in high places who had insisted on positions for friends, whether there was work to do or not, received any part of the pay envelope; but that they had their pay of some kind, she knew well enough. It was all part of the established system of 'honest graft'.

And there is the master key to the downfall of Mrs. Knapp - 'honest graft'. It had honey-combed her world - home, school, business, social, public life. She probably had accepted it from childhood as a lubricant on the hard road she had to travel to rise from poverty. She came into politics prepared to accept to the full what she believed to be the law of politics - the rule of fear and favor, and she was already skilled in applying it. She could not believe that her political backers would allow her to suffer for doing what she apparently believed they all did.

What shocked her political backers, or perhaps scared them so that they shamelessly deserted her, publicly at least,

in her day of need, was less, I take it, that she had profited than that she had left so many traces behind her -- that, and her frank dependence on them, her faith that they would not dare let her be punished. When they did not save her, she believed, or at least claimed to believe, that it was because they saw that she was about to take from them offices which they wanted for themselves. "They feared me," she told a friend on the very eve of her sentence, "feared I would be Hoover's running mate!" They wanted a man - I am the victim of man's jealousy of women in politics. It was necessary to ruin me."

However exaggerated Mrs. Knapp's self-deception, her apparent inability to believe that she had done anything out of the ordinary, there is nothing illogical about her case, given the practices of the social, business and political worlds in which she had always lived.

And if one Mrs. Knapp is possible, others are. That is why she should not be forgotten. Let us not delude ourselves. So long as we tolerate the system of 'honest graft' which today is thriving and growing everywhere in American life, we can count on future Florence Knapps as we can on future Harry Sinclairs and Albert Falls.