Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th St.
New York City

THE FIRST LADY OF OUR LAND

A PORTRAIT

We had gathered at the end of the long corridor, ~~three hundred~~ thirty or more women from the ends of the land, a committee called to consider women's part in the Great Crusade to meet human needs inaugurated a few hours before by the President of the United States. We ~~are waiting~~, posed, for the inevitable photograph, and waiting until ~~she~~, our Chairman, should appear. There was a little buzz behind us. "Mrs. Roosevelt," the doorman said. That was all, no uniformed outrider, no sounding of trumpets.

To know how really lovely she is, this Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady of Our Land, you should have seen her then - tall, very tall, slender, perfectly formed, beautiful hands, arms, carriage, the thin floating white dress she wore setting off her long grace as she quickly, naturally, gaily moved to her place in front of the group of women, gaily obeyed the autocratic photographer:- "A little more to the right" - "eyes here" - "just one more." When it was

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

over she found her way down the vast corridor to the great room where five hundred diners sat waiting for her arrival with no more ceremony or self-consciousness than had attended her arrival.

She was at the center of the high table, flanked on either side by chosen guests of the General Staff of those organized armies of men and women who "give themselves" to that noble and disinterested task of seeing that annually provision is made for certain human needs, the care of the old, the sick, the child, the boy, the girl.

Attentive, interested, quiet, she sat through the long dinner, listened to the long speeches. Finally it was her turn.

The tall figure in its clinging white rose and waited with grave face until the long warm applauding of the standing diners died away. Then leaning forward as if she would be nearer to those to whom she spoke she stood gathering herself together for what one sensed at the first word was to be a struggle to express some deep burden. On the table before her was a digest of what she was supposed to say, but she was not thinking of the digest. You realized that as the high sweet voice began hesitatingly, searching for

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

words, deliberating, thinking out sentences, it was plain that she felt so deeply about something that she could not bear it if she could not make us who listened feel it too.

"Men and women and children must have more than mere food and shelter," she said. "The sick, the old, the orphan, youth - these we must look after if the country is to be worth living in. Above all today when courage is reviving must we keep our agencies for human welfare alive - active. Hard to find money? Yes, but it must be found. It will be found if the needs are understood and this is our part. We, the women of the land - all of us - high and low - must undertake the task of spreading understanding of what is needed. How are we to do it?"

"Can we do it? Not unless we, ourselves, understand; and we cannot understand unless we see. We must go for ourselves, each of us, into the alleys of our towns, the ~~homes~~ lanes of our countrysides and see and only then can we really know the needs of this hour. Knowing we must see to it that others know, that they feel what we feel. If responsible men and women would only go and look at the things happening today they would not allow these things to happen.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

"Here is something I saw - a woman holding her dead child. Twelve hours before she had been evicted, forced to find shelter with her sick baby in a cold and cheerless room. She had begged the sheriff who turned her out to let her stay until the child was better. "What have I to do with your god damn did?' he said. 'That's not my business.'" Brave lady, not afraid to use the ugly words. "What have I to do with your god damn kid?" "I found her holding her dead baby."

"If he had but known - seen - that landlord would not have allowed that. Not knowing is back of so much of our misery. It is the job of us women to see that those who are responsible see, as we have seen."

And so it went on, that high sweet voice, picking its way, voicing its burden, making us see - feel - until hot tears stood in more than one pair of eyes.

It was the emanation of a lovely spirit burdened by the sorrows of others; the lovely and burdened spirit of the First Lady of this Land.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.