

The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

October 3, 1919: p. 18

The Girl Who Took a Soldier's Job

Her Story by One of Her Own Sex Who Says She is Seeking Her Own Place, Not the Man's Place

By JOANNA W. HARTING



Not all women delight in the continual care of the baby and the baking of pies.

TWO years ago when the men began to drop out of the industrial world at the call to the colors their women associates gradually slipped into their places, and in the majority of cases effectively filled them.

Those men have now nearly all come back to claim their old, or better jobs.

What of the girl, then, in the soldier's job? What is she going to do? What does she want to do? What has her war experience done for her?

Did she prove the solution of one great problem, only to become the author of a greater one?

Oh, it is not the ex-service man who is pointing the accusing finger at her as a fundamental cause in the industrial unrest and the problem of the unemployed. Far be it from the American soldier to find fault with his honest-to-glory American girl whom he adores now more than ever after being separated from her for many weary months. It is the sages, the Solomons who could have prevented the world war in the first place but who now are ready to recast civilization so as to satisfy everybody; who have a sedative for striking subway guards and Broadway stars and who could subjugate the H. C. L. within a week, who have discovered her perfidy.

They applied to the employment situation the time-honored advice the self-appointed sleuth is always ready to follow—"Find the woman in the case"—and they found her bending over the hero's ledger or his work bench. Moreover, they learned that she was holding down said job at a smaller salary than would be expected by the man and therefore giving an ungrateful and unpatriotic employer an unfair advantage over one of liberty's champions.

To determine to my own satisfaction what degree of truth there might be in this more or less loose talk I visited many of the employment agencies where job hunters—men and women—foregather. The complaints along this line were so few as to be negligible and in no case represented a type.

THE GIRL WHO TOOK A SOLDIER'S JOB

few as to be negligible and in no case represented a type.

It is true that in many instances the women are retained, but seldom at the expense of the men. Most concerns have been able to make satisfactory adjustments. When a soldier was reinstated in his former capacity the fair employer transferred the girl who had made good during the war to another post. All of which constitutes a totally different situation than that representing the American girl underbidding the former service man in the labor mart with a mercenary employer looming large in the background. There may be such instances, very likely there are a few, but they are isolated cases and not typical conditions.

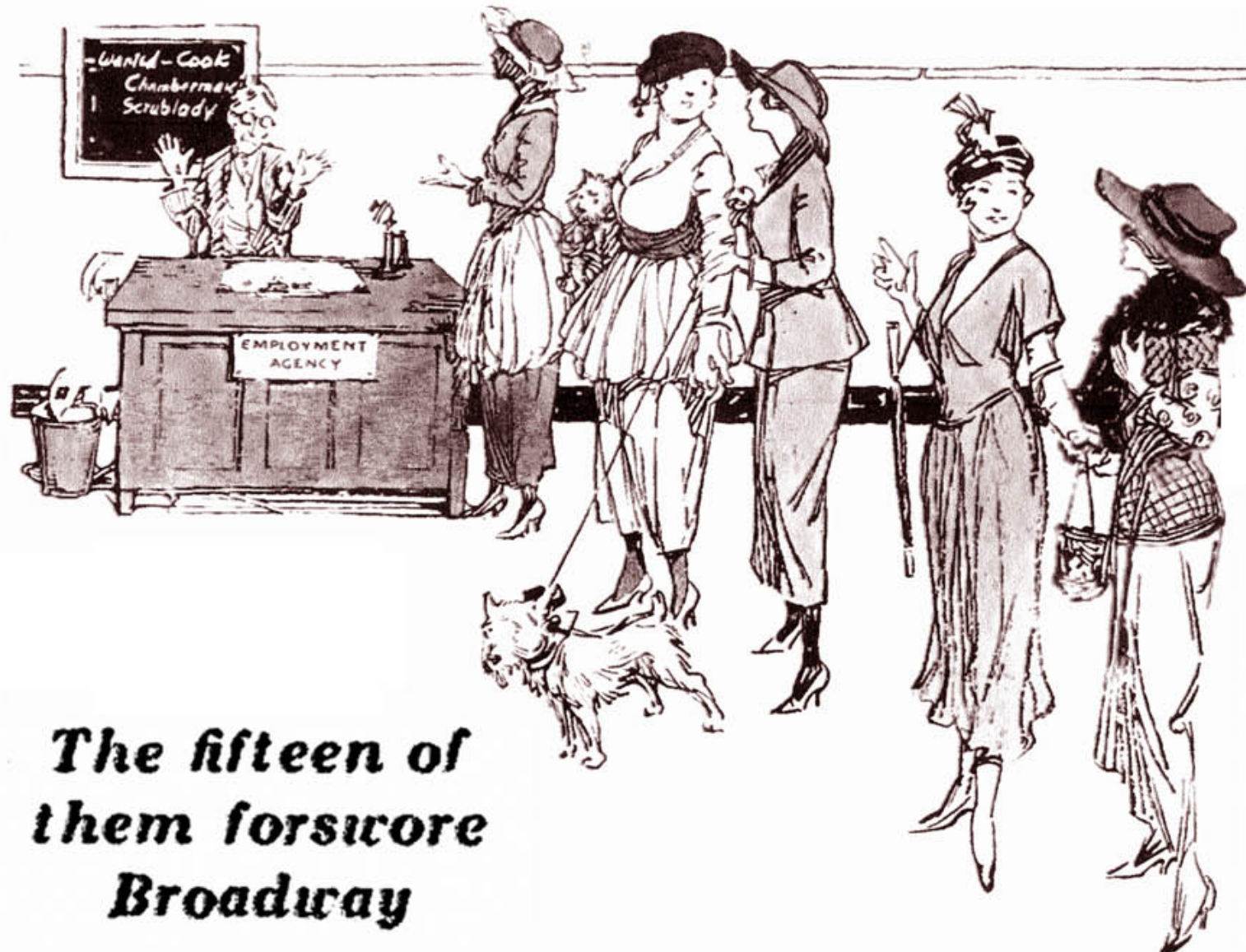
It seemed on the surface that such a situation existed in many of the machine trades. Girls were performing tasks at forty cents an hour for which men received sixty to seventy cents. Inquiry revealed the fact that these girls were in this line of work long before the war, but their presence was only discovered through the industrial turnover brought about by the withdrawal of about four million men from peace-time pursuits. That their compensation should be from one-third to one-half less than that received by their brothers, is just an instance of the prevailing injustice against which women in every field of endeavor have had to fight and still are fighting.

IN the question of clerical work, the other line in which it seemed that women had precluded the re-employment of service men, a factor to be considered is the preference which many employers have for a feminine clerical force. In concerns where large numbers of men were employed in a clerical capacity and the change to women was made as a war emergency, the women proved so satisfactory that they were retained in the cause of efficiency. It is rather generally admitted that the young woman office worker receiving a salary of twenty to twenty-five dollars a week takes her job more seriously than the young man getting the same remuneration. In organizations where this condition obtains there can hardly be any just reflection on the girls or the employers.

The girl who was left behind, who kept the hearth fires burning and the pot a-boiling and all the rest of it, while the American man was over there, is not trying to usurp his place in the industrial world but she certainly is determined to find one of her own. If search proves it to be non-existent she is ready to create one.

Witness the adventurous lady who visited an employment agency and flatly announced to the secretary that she saw a decided need for a persistent individual who would run to cover delinquent spouses in arrears with alimony, and pronounced herself just the character for the job. The secretary smelled a rat, but her olfactory sense was in error. Her client was not a divorcee—she had never entered the first stage of matrimony—but like all capable spinsters she had strong ideas on the disciplining of obstreperous husbands. The

THE GIRL WHO TOOK A SOLDIER'S JOB



The fifteen of them forswore Broadway

employment secretary never had had a call for such talent, but she took the applicant's name and address and promised to notify her in event of such a demand.

Then the war, plus the strikes, has made some girls see the error of their ways more quickly than any reformer could have done. Consider this edifying little episode, a by-product of the actors' strike in New York: Fifteen chorus girls in one bunch descended upon an employment agency, not of the theatrical booking variety, and individually and collectively begged for the chance to fill a regular job instead of pink silk tights.

The fifteen of them forswore Broadway, renounced the footlights for the green-shaded lamp, rejected their satin slippers for flat heels and promised to scorn the taxi and cultivate the jitney. They crossed their hearts and hoped to die if they were not through with Broadway for good and all, for ever and ever, and not only while it lay dingy and dusty with the playhouses all dark and the cabarets dry. Of course it is too soon to test the sincerity of their conversion and the longevity of their good resolutions.

And while these little ladies of the chorus are finding the high spots of the life too few and far between for the long stretches of desert intervening, that traditional model of virtue and decorum, the schoolma'am, begins to stifle in the still air of the halls of learning and gasps for a breath of the open. The demand for women workers during the last two years has given the school teacher the opportunity for other work during her summer vacations. She has had the chance for a tryout in some other field.

THE most general desire among school teachers is for some form of social work. Teachers, whose salaries have reached the prescribed limit, hear of welfare workers in big industrial plants receiving a thousand dollars a year more than that limit. Such posts are few. Probably not ten per cent. of social workers ever pull down these plums, but they are the luscious fruit ever tempting the ambitious.

The teacher finds outside that five-hour day and five-day week, endless papers to be corrected, lessons to be planned, committees, meetings and lectures to be attended and all sorts of new ideas and theories with which she must acquaint

THE GIRL WHO TOOK A SOLDIER'S JOB

herself if she would keep abreast of the times. And as for the vacation—ask any teacher how much she needs it.

It must always be remembered that in the teaching profession there are likely to be many square pegs in round holes because parents count over the aforesaid advantages and urge daughters who have no natural aptitude for work with children to make it their vocation.

The nurses also are seeking pastures new and the women returning from service overseas are loathe to return to private practice. Welfare work is the blanket title covering their ambitions. It is rare to find an industrial plant of any size today which does not employ a graduate nurse and the same fact applies to the department store and the hotel with a large force of help. The salaries calculated on a weekly basis do not compare with that of the nurse in private practice, yet taken on a yearly average, deductions being made for idleness, any discrepancy is balanced by the advantages in the way of regular hours and allotted times of work.

It is not only the woman trained in a highly specialized calling and attempting professional somersaults, who has been affected by the prevailing unrest. Women who have been out of the professional or business world for a decade, who re-entered it with the intention of remaining there only temporarily while a husband or a son was serving his flag, show a decided disposition to stay there. Girls and women who have never been trained for any special line of work, and through volunteer activities during the period of the war found themselves capable of assuming responsibilities, are now seeking to commercialize those capabilities.

Two girls from very comfortably situated families in a small town in the northern part of an eastern state were found desperately scurrying around a port city. They had just returned from canteen work overseas and were in search of "a regular job." They did not have to support themselves if they were willing to be dutiful children and return to the parental roof, but after getting a squint at American city life—even in mid-summer—they vowed never to go back to the curfew and the cowbells.

Many women like these over-estimate their powers, thinking that the standards set for paid employees in business houses are the same as those for volunteer work-

THE GIRL WHO TOOK A SOLDIER'S JOB

ers in charity and philanthropic organizations. Just what percentage of women seek outside employment primarily for the stimulus derived from rubbing elbows with one's fellows in the work-a-day world and what proportion desire it in order to increase the family revenues, cannot be ascertained. In the average instance there probably is a blending of the two motives.

Quite striking is the number of girls in offices and shops today who marry and retain their positions. Whether this state of affairs be due to the spread of the feminist doctrine of economic independence for women or the increased cost of living is open to conjecture. It goes without saying that many of these girls married soldiers just before they went across, men who could make no provision for their support. The soldier husband may have returned ill or his financial affairs may not guarantee his support of a little home unaided. The girl keeps her job. How long she will keep it depends more upon the type of woman she is than on the fortunes of her mate.

THE woman for whom a competitive life is one sickening struggle, for whom the grind and the drudgery and the disappointments eclipse the last glow of exhilaration that the battle excites, will get out of it as soon as circumstances permit. She is the one who has "married for a home." And it is well that she should seek her happiness and find it where her heart is, for the competitive world offers few compensations to the woman with no marked ability, whose labor rewards her with nothing more, either in a material or an intellectual way, than the daily mouthful.

But the fact remains that there is a very marked and a steadily increasing tendency on the part of married women to work outside the home. Not all women delight in the continuous care of the baby and the everlasting baking of pies, old-fashioned assertions to the contrary. Most women like to do both occasionally. But women who have been successful in business and have arrived at a substantial salary are loathe to relinquish either the money or the interest in their work, upon marriage.

A social worker, discussing this tendency, said that in the office of the organization with which he is affiliated there were half a dozen stenographers earning from twelve hundred to fifteen hundred dollars a year who had married men drawing salaries ranging from two thousand to twenty-five hundred dollars a year. In no instance would the man's salary alone enable the husband and wife to live and dress as he and she had done when single. The girl, in every case, preferred to continue at business and to pay a woman to

THE GIRL WHO TOOK A SOLDIER'S JOB

do the housework rather than relinquish any material comfort to which she had been accustomed.

Asked whether this mode of living would not militate against the possibility of children, he replied that after a few years, when the financial circumstances improved, the wives would probably leave

the business world and be absorbed into domestic life or else they would retire for a year or two when they were bearing children, as school teachers do, now that the storm of protest is past.

HE called attention to the college women in the business and professional world. The average college woman does not marry young. She is probably twenty-two before she is out of college and at least twenty-five before she is drawing a salary that is anything of a return on the investment of her education. If she married a professional man near her own age, with no income but that from his practice, their matrimonial bark, so far as finances are concerned, would be a pitifully frail one.

Regardless of the motive which actuates her, the class to which she belongs or the amount of her earnings, it is plain to the observer that the woman who was either forced into industry through the war or entered of her own volition, shows every sign of staying there, at least for the immediate future. In the case of the married woman, the necessity for relieving the strain on the family budget was probably the primary motive, in the beginning, which brought her there. Even though that pressure be removed, the satisfying sense of independence and the stimulus which comes from being part of a great and worthy whole, will keep many a woman there. The symptoms of unrest exhibited by the women denote only the same ailments that are epidemic in the male population.

Just what is the trouble?

Let us resort to the non-committal doctor's diagnosis and say it is "nerves"—social, and "liver"—political. The one tends to make folks unduly irritable; the other befogs the vision. Either might superinduce a little "vertigo"—industrial. And at that the diagnosis would be more sound and worthy of credence than the findings of the first mentioned sages who detected the feminine fly in the soldier's ointment.

You are all wrong, Solomon, you are all wrong; the American girl is not ag'in the American soldier. She is always with him. Blessings on them both!