

FRUIT PACKER FOR A MONTH

Woman Learns How it Feels to Work for a Living.

TOILING UNDER HIGH PRESSURE

Not the Labor that Wears Upon One, but the Monotony and the Strain of Constant Haste.

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 15.—There was nothing scientific about it. I didn't want to know how many women are mangled in machinery yearly nor whether model factories supply hot tea at noon. I just wanted to know personally how it would feel to get a job.

Positions I knew all about. You apply for these and are accepted. You ask for a job and get taken on. I wanted to know the feel of it; to ask, to be refused, to be taken, to be looked over. To do something not because I had any special inclination or training, but because I happened to be on hand at 7 a. m. and some one else did not happen to be there. To work on day after day with no more ultimate ambition than to make as much as possible at that particular thing.

Because I wanted to begin at the very bottom, to feel very much alone and unprotected, I went to a society that keeps a secretary to help girls to find work, and asked assistance. She was a very well dressed secretary and she looked me over critically. For five minutes she just sized me up and then said "Shirley."

I had expected this. Organizations always advise sewing. But I said I would rather do anything else, for I wanted to see what else she would suggest. She frowned slightly and then followed with canvassing, housework, nurse girl and waiting on table in a country hotel. I shook my head at all.

The frown deepened. Then suddenly it cleared and she said "Fruit," with the air of having brought forth a very precious gem indeed.

Couldn't Refuse Fruit.

I didn't have the courage to refuse fruit, besides it seemed to be a very wonderful thing. You simply went off somewhere "into the beautiful country" and enjoyed yourself. It couldn't really be called work and if you were any good at all you made \$1 a day. Hundreds of women yearly followed the ripening fruit through California.

I forget just how many the secretary had personally driven into fruit, but it was all down in a little red book. She called it "gathering statistics on one of the greatest industrial opportunities for the working women of our state." So I let her enter me in the little red book and give me a printed slip, good for a ticket at the railroad office, and I signed two papers promising to refund the cost.

Then I packed a grip and went away 30 miles "into the beautiful country," to a town where the Chamber of Commerce gives away receipt books on how to get an entire dinner with raisins and prunes. I found a room in a rambling old house down close to the fruit houses, where engines switched back and forth all night long and the front door was never closed. All night heavy steps sounded on the stairs and then the landlady's bell would jangle wildly and a few minutes after her

tired, colorless voice would explain, "There's nothing left tonight." The next morning I got up at an ungodly hour and became a woman who toils. Some day I shall write a paper on "Females I Have Known." Mine had a very small waist, a pompadour and an imposing manner of waving risen from the ranks. I asked for work in a tone that I tried to make stately independent and fittingly respectful. The conjunction is difficult.

Ways of the Forelady. "She looked me over leisurely. Had I ever worked in fruit before? No. She couldn't use me, she wanted experienced packers. And she said she had a woman who would do the work and I began to beg and plead. And I talked until I saw her expression soften.

I don't remember what I said before I confessed to having a husband who had left me, but I remember hearing myself say that I had a little boy. I called him Willie and said that he was 2 years old. "Get a knife and a maul over there and I'll see if I can use you," she said. I got a knife and a maul and went and stood at the vacant place she had indicated and wondered if I always had such possibilities latent or whether they were born of the occasion.

It was a dried fig packing house, and I can see it yet, every face, almost every fig. The big barnlike room with sliding doors opening on a platform piled high with boxes of fruit, the trains drawn up on the siding waiting to be loaded. And beyond, scattered cottages, the smokestacks of other packing houses and then the country—miles upon miles of green, shimmering in the hot sun. The long tables lined with women and girls—heavy faced Russians, fat Neapolitans with dirty waists, dark eyed Armenians, clean self-assertive Americans. Every woman bent over a pile of yellow figs, the heavy smell of tons of warm fruit, the clank of machinery, the soft thud of the figs as they fell from the separator, the click of the scales as the women weighed and the high, singing call, "More fra-t fruit!"

Learning the Work. Suddenly the forewomen were behind me. "Watch me," she said.

Leaning over she seized a hot fig, gave it one slit with a knife, pushed up with her first fingers and down with her thumb and make a butterfly out of it. Again and again she did it, then stepped wearily aside and told me to try.

I flourished the knife, gave the slit and was left with a piece of skin sticking on my thumb. "Where, where or how the interior of that fig vanished, I shall never know. It was and it was not.

A dozen times more she showed me, and then to my infinite relief left me to practice. I tried to catch the trick from the girl opposite, but her hands flew so quickly I could make nothing of it. Besides, her fingers were all wrapped in rags to keep the lye that is put on during the drying from eating away the nails. Before my month was up I could pick out the different workers by their wounds: Crumbling red figs; big, callous lumps at the ends of the thumbs of packers; callous stripes across the palm, peelers in the canneries; skin thick and white like leprosy, tomato canners; finger ends fat and black, raisin packers. It's almost a Bertillon system.

Then just when I thought that I never could flatten out a fig I did it. After that there was nothing to learn, just to work up a speed.

By 11 I could do it, not quickly but without spoiling any. I could pack my maul so that each of the five divisions weighed the exact eight ounces prescribed by law, and when they didn't could ram a few figs into the center without taking the whole to pieces. After that it was just slit, push, pack and on without coasting.

It was no good trying to talk to the girls around. They only looked at me suspiciously. They were there to pack figs, so presumably was I. Every moment wasted in anything else meant so much money less.

Gradually the awful necessity of haste frightened me. With eyes fixed on their work they turned neither to the right nor to the left. The tension was almost palpable. I too began to hurry, every muscle rigid with effort. An unseen taskmaster was driving me forward. I forgot the sharp ache in my ankles and the knife pain between my shoulders. I thought of nothing else but finishing another brick.

At 12 the whistle blew. As one the day workers quit, but the packers went on until the angry voice of the boss called "No more." Even then an old Sicilian, wrinkled and yellow like a bit of leather, tried to elude him, but he went over and jerked her from the table by her arm.

Screaming on the saints to bear witness that she had come five minutes late that morning and needed the money, shaking her scrawny fist in his face, she tried to struggle back to her place. The man dragged himself free, but between them her last tray of figs fell to the floor. Jabbering wildly the old woman went down on her knees, while the man turned away laughing. She picked them up alone, mumbling to herself, the big, gold hoops in her ears beating a mad dance. When she had finished she tied a green shawl over her head and went away.

After lunch we began again. It was not hard work as such work goes. I know that now. But the awful monotony of those endless figs. By 2 I could scarcely stand, but the others worked on without stopping. They call it a good day, one like that, when the fruit pours in an everlasting stream from the separator and nothing stops the flattening of the figs.

By 3 it was stifling. Outside the heat palpitated as if the very earth were struggling to finish her task, to force the growing things to maturity before nightfall. By 3:30 I had made 80 cents. They told me I had done well for a green day and when I had been at it several seasons I would be sure to make my \$2 a day. They also told me that I would soon get used to the awful pain in my shoulders, or I wouldn't feel it. I don't remember which. It amounted to the same thing.

Passing of the Pain. They were quite right. By the fifth day the sharpness of the pain was gone. At night I felt only drowsy, stupidly tired. By the end of the week I was making 90 cents on good days, but the life and color were all gone out of it. It was not until after I had left it that I could see again as I had seen on the first day.

By the middle of the second week the others existed only as they made more or less than I. The white-haired old English woman who packed so slowly, so accurately at the far end of the table and who stopped every few moments to wipe her glasses and give a little sigh, and the wrinkled, Sicilian witch who had fought with the boss and owned a row of flats and had a bank account, and Little Diamonds, the pretty Armenian next to me, whose money went into payments on the family orchard, so that she couldn't marry the pale, quiet young fellow who stood all day at the throttle of the separator and gazed at her with dark, sad eastern eyes—they had all gone down together.

By the end of the second week I had become a machine—a machine for the flattening of figs. I had not tried to do it. I had just stood steadily packing and packing and packing.

Out of a Job. Then I lost my place. Something happened somewhere to the fig supply and half

the packers were let out. No one explained the reason and none of us asked. For two days I went from one place to another, my paper of lunch under one arm, my apron under the other, ready to begin. No one wanted me. Some of the forewomen were indifferent and some were really sorry that they had nothing for me; some were sympathetic and had the manner of mentioning to distant days when they also had "been looking for a job." Some were as superior as the secretary who gathered statistics.

On the third day I began going to the same place in the afternoon and in the morning hoping the secretary would have failed to come back and that I would get her place. Others tried the same thing.

I met an untidy, stupid Russian peasant three times in one afternoon coming out as I went in. The third time we smiled at each other kindly and I understood why the unemployed band together. The world had readjusted itself into those who had work and those who wanted work. On the fourth morning as I stood waiting for the forewoman I saw the stupid, dirty Russian working away silently. She had got ahead of me, had a distinct feeling of dislike for her.

From Figs to Peaches. On the afternoon of the fourth day I was taken on for a rush order of dried peaches. Now, packing figs is like handling warm "kissed" potatoes, but dried peaches are like tumbled stones. If possible, the work is more monotonous.

There are no mounds to wash, nothing to weigh. You just stand in the same spot hour after hour flattening dried peaches. Presumably you do it with your hands only. I did it with every muscle in my body, for there is no limit to the extension possibilities of a dried peach. I could make one into doormat or squeeze it into a pea, still keeping it perfectly flat.

When the fresh trays of warm fruit are brought the forewoman emits sounds like foot ball signals, 7-5, 8-11, etc. You fall upon the fruit, grabbing as much of the best as you can get your hands over, and begin to lay it in the boxes seven across by nine up, etc. The only excitement is that as soon as you have begun to get used to one way, the forewoman emits a new signal and you have to do something else.

If anyone is rude enough to grab at the same fruit that you want, you push her roughly as roughly as necessary to separate her from it. In those packing houses where the fruit is not brought round but you have to go after it you have less chance.

As soon as the clank, clank of the steamer begins, and the soft, hot fruit comes pouring into the bin you seize your box and beat your way into the packed mass of women and girls. If the sharp edge of a box is driven into your back it's all part of the getting of the fruit. Next time it will be your box and your back. There is no permanent ill feeling about it. At least not when you are both Americans. It is different when a box is yielded by a "dago." A "dago" is anyone with a dark complexion who can't speak English and who makes more money than you do. When a "dago" steps on you or prods you in the jam it is always malicious and pre-meditated.

Fail for the Money. So it went on day after day. Sometimes I was let out and sometimes I left on my own accord. As the fruit came pouring down from the orchards and vineyards there was no trouble in getting work and no one was laid off. It is like a sweeping tide of the sea, swallowing every human thing capable of work.

Those who need it and those who don't are all dragged under together. It is a chance to make money; no one can stand against it. There is something terrifying about it. It is almost palpable, that haunting, driving thing forever beating the workers on. I saw the Thing once, saw it clearly.

I was packing raisins in a huge packing house. Upon each table a long iron funnel from the room above poured a stream of boiling hot raisins all day. We worked in crews of three.

When he had filled forty-eight pound packages with raisins, weighed each one, closed it and packed all forty-eight in a wooden box we got 5 cents to be divided among the three. At the same table with me were a sharp-faced little American woman and a heavy Russian mother with her 15-year-old daughter. The woman had been working seven years and the girl three. They made \$3 a day each.

Early in the afternoon I could just see them through the steam that rose from the hot fruit. The faces of the two women were deep red and the water ran in streams from them. But the girl was quite white. They worked without speaking, almost without moving. I left because when I woke at night I could see two red faces and the white one, like lost souls in inferno, condemned to pack forever. The Thing was behind them.

Why She Quit. I worked another week and then I stopped. I stopped because I was frightened.

I was bottling preserved peaches when it struck me with the force of a physical blow. From 7 in the morning until 5:30 at night I had stood in a room roofed with netting to keep out the bees—only the netting was broken and the bees came in anyway—and slid preserved peaches down a stick into a bottle. Suddenly my little stick snapped and couldn't go on working.

For ten minutes while the forewoman hunted for another stick I sat doing nothing, watching the others get ahead of me. The girl next to me never turned her head. The fat, dripping halves continued to slide down the stick and form clean, yellow hair moons up the side of the bottle.

"Don't you ever feel like packing them wrong side up?" I asked, "just for a change?" "No," she said simply and began on a new bottle. "That 'ud be stupid."

She had been sliding peaches down that stick for two months. That was why I quit. She frightened me. I was afraid that very soon I too would think it was stupid to slide the peaches in upside down.

Generous Child. Master Walter, aged 5, had eaten the soft portions of toast at breakfast and piled the crusts on his plate. "What I always ate the crusts of my toast."

"Did you like them?" asked the little fellow, cheerfully. "Yes," replied the parent.

"Have you ever felt like packing them wrong side up?" replied Master Walter, pushing his plate across the table. —Delinestor.

STORIES OF QUAKE VICTIMS

Survivors Tell Frightful Stories of Experiences in Tragic Events.

GHOULS WAGE OPEN WARFARE

Though Period of Shocks is Blank to Most Sufferers, Some of Them Tell Remarkable Stories of Catastrophe.

NAPLES, Jan. 23.—(Special.)—It is doubtful if the full horrible story of the earthquake will ever be told. The survivors have only a confused idea of what took place. They were awakened by the falling of their houses and how they escaped they cannot guess. The awful minutes, in most cases when they were struggling for life, are a nightmare or a blank, which perhaps even time will not clear.

However, some few have been able to put their sensations and experiences into words. I have heard of a man who inhabited the fourth floor of an apartment house and who was awakened by what he took to be an explosion. When he gained the sense he found himself in an alarming position. The floor, probably through some defect in building, had given way cleanly as though cut by a knife, right under his large double bed, which thus had two legs hanging in the void, the other two being on the portion of the floor left. The bed was dangerously inclined and from it he rolled his wife into the gully, he saving himself from a like fate by throwing himself violently from the floor.

He was rescued by the firemen after stopping in his dangerous position for forty-eight hours without food and listening to the moans and cries of his little daughter, who had shared her mother's fate. He was miraculously taken out of the debris with scarcely a whole bone in her body, dead.

Babe Killed by Ghoul. A poor woman who was found in the streets of Messina attracted attention through her strange behavior. At first it was thought that she had become insane, but she was afterwards discovered that she was perfectly sane. It seems that she had lost six children, five of whom slept in a room together, while she and a baby occupied a small room near by. They were all buried among the debris of the house, the bigger children probably killed in the fall, as she heard no sound. The baby fell with her under a beam, but on her chest and would have been alive now had not one of the ghouls who added fresh horrors to the scene, by not finding anything to steal and irritated by the crying of the child, which attracted attention immediately. The mother was afterwards released and finding a friend on the street, she also escaped.

The friend had evidently been the "goodly" of her district and told the poor, credulous creature that if she said two beads of her rosary at every street corner, never repeating a street and crossed herself every time she stepped on a stone, she would be safe. So the poor thing had pursued her pitiable perambulations for twenty-four hours, without food, never stopping for fear of thus indirectly killing her poor children, long since dead.

She also stated that she had seen a ghoul in the jam it is always malicious and pre-meditated. Conditions in Reggio are worse than at Messina. It would take an vivid pen of a Dante to give an adequate idea of the conditions in the sister cities. At Reggio two-thirds of the population lie under the debris of fallen buildings, the other third are in the streets, without roof, without food, without water, without clothing. These fatal thirty seconds cast down all the conventional barriers set up by society and reduced rich and poor alike to primitive men who must have shelter from cold and clothing and food for his body, and if he is deprived of these a sufficient time he will fight for them. To this must be added total darkness at night, only broken by the fiendish thieves who, having looted a shop had become possessed of a bit of candle and with it made the round of the lugubrious rubies, to see what they could steal from the bodies of the dead.

These jackals, composed of the scum of the town, are so bold that their researchers are in many cases conducted in broad day and they resist with firearms and knives any one who tries to interfere with them. In one case a man, after putting his wife in safety, returned to try and secure some of his valuables. Arrived at what was once his house he was stopped and prevented from entering by a couple of men who, when he hesitated, shot him dead. The few police and soldiers that there are, are totally inadequate to keep the dangerous and unscrupulous element within bounds so they have ordered to shoot on sight, the result being regular pitched battles in full sight of the principal streets, in which law and order do not always get the best of it. Thus several soldiers have lost their lives and several more will undoubtedly do so before long.

Killed for Rescuing Girl. One particularly touching case of this kind has just occurred at Messina. A soldier who had, through his exceptional strength, succeeded in lifting a beam which had pinned him down, from over his legs, worked for almost two days in rescuing others with scarcely any rest. Late at night he was returning to a shed which he had found to sleep in when he heard the sobbing cry of a little girl. He stopped and a group of three men, with whom a girl of 8 years was struggling violently, came into view. He stopped them, whereupon the child fled with what was afterwards proved to be a considerable sum of money which she had gathered together in her father's house. The thieves, furious at the escape of their victim, set upon the soldier and killed him by kicking him to death.

These are but a few of the daily tragedies of this modern inferno, the victim of water, fire and earthquake, and rendered a hell by man; one moment the most beautiful spot on earth, the next a sink of terror and iniquity.

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