

THE GIRLS WHO MAKE BOXES

NELLIE BLY TELLS HOW IT FEELS TO BE A WHITE SLAVE.

She Tries Her Hand at Making Paper Boxes—Difficulty in Getting a Job—Must Work Two Weeks for Nothing—After One Learns the Trade It is Hard to Earn a Living—A Fair Picture of the Work.



VERY early the other morning I started out, not with the pleasure-seekers, but with those who toil the day long that they may live. Everybody was rushing—girls of all ages and appearances and snoring men—and I went along, as one of the throngs. I had often wondered at the tales of poor pay and cruel treatment that working girls tell. There was one way of getting at the truth, and I determined to try it: It was becoming myself a Paper Box Factory Girl. Accordingly, I started out in season of work without experience, reference orught to aid me.

"I am willing to work for nothing until I learn," I urged.

"Work for nothing! Why, if you paid us for coming we wouldn't have you in our way," said the man in charge of the establishment to teach women trades, and another, in answer to my plea for help.

"How do they ever learn?" I asked.



"I do not know," she said, "they never tell each other, and the boss keep their time."

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was trying to give out the impression that I was quite used to this thing. Indeed, I considered the lurch a telling stroke of thoughtfulness in my new boss, and eyed with some pride, in which was mixed a little jealousy, the grease-spot, which was gradually growing in size.

Early as it was I found all the girls there and at work. I went through a small wagon-yard, the only entrance to the office. After making my excuses to the gentleman at the desk, I walked to a pretty little girl, who had her apron full of paste-board, and said:

"Take this lady up to Nora."

"Is she to work on boxes or ocarinas?" asked the girl.

"Nora has to put her on boxes."

Following my little guide I climbed the narrow, dark and most perpendicular stair it has ever been my misfortune to see. On and on we went, through small rooms, filled with working girls, to the top floor—fourth or fifth story, I have forgotten which. Anyway I was breathless when I got there.

"Nora, here is a lady you are to put on boxes," called out my pretty little guide.

All the girls that surrounded the long tables turned from their work and looked at me curiously. The absorbent girl addressed me with a long stare, on which was played a look of incredulity.

"See if the hat-way is down, and show her where to put her boxes."

Then the forewoman ordered one of the girls to get ready a set of paste-board before a long table, on which was placed a box of paste-board, squared, labeled in the center. Nora and I some long strips of paper, on the table, then taking up a scrub-brush, she dipped it into a bucket of paste and then rubbed it over the paper, and put it quickly and neatly over the corners, binding them together as she finished them in place. But quickly cutting the paper off at the side, with her thumb nail and a wiggling thumb, and in the next corner.

"I did not find the work difficult to learn, but rather disagreeable. The room was not ventilated, and the paste and glue were very offensive. The piles of boxes made conversation impossible, and the girls, except by signs, were almost wholly mute. She was very timid at first, but after I questioned her kindly she grew more communicative."

"I live on Ridge street with my parents. My father is a musician, but he will not go on the streets to play. He very seldom gets an engagement. My mother is sick nearly all the time. I have a sister who works at housework. She can save some from her wages. I have another sister who has been spoiling sick in twenty-three years for five years now. She makes \$6 a week. When she comes home at night her face and hands and hair are all colored from the sick she works on during the day. It makes her sick, and she is always taking medicine."

"Have you worked before?"

"Oh, yes! I used to work at paste-board in Spring street for 7 cents a piece, pieces were made about \$1.50 for each box. Because the bosses were not kind and we only had three little oil-lamps to see to work by. The rooms were very dark, but they never allowed us to burn the gas. Later here, they did not take the work home to do. They did it cheap, for the forewoman."

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"Why don't they live at these homes that are run to accommodate working women?"

"Oh, those homes are frauds. A girl cannot obtain any more home comforts, and then the regulations are more than they will endure. A girl who works all day must have some recreation and she never finds it in them."

"Have you worked in box factories long?"

"For eleven years, and I can say that it has ever given me a living, and an average I make \$4 a week. I pay out \$2.50 for board and my wash bill at the house, 15 cents. Can any one expect a woman to dress on what remains?"

"I get 10 cents a hundred for half pound boxes, and 50 cents a hundred for half pound boxes."

"What work do you do on a box for that pay?"

"One very bright girl, Maggie, who sat opposite me told me that she had been a good girl. This is my second week here," she said, "and, of course, I won't receive any pay until next week, when I expect to get \$1.50 for six days work. My father was a driver before he got sick. I don't know what he does now, but a doctor says he will die. Before I left this morning he said my father will die soon. I could hardly work because of it. I am the oldest child, and I have a mother and two sisters younger. I am sixteen and my father is in the paper box factory."

"Do you have much rent to pay?"

"We have two rooms in a house on Houston street. They are small and have low ceilings, and there are several other thinmen in the same house. We pay for these rooms \$14 per month. We do not have much to eat, but then father doesn't mind it because he can't eat. We could not live if father could not get pay out rent."

"I once worked in a carpet factory at Yorkville. I only had to work there one week until I learned, and afterwards I made at piece-work a dollar a day. When my father got sick in my mother's room, he had to go to the hospital, and I could not see him while he had remained there."

"Why do you not try something else?" I asked.

"I would like to, but could find nothing. Father says to get out of the house, and I would like to go to a place in Twenty-third street, where I have a little money, but the man said he would not give me a penny unless I paid \$25 in advance. I could not do that."

"I then spoke of the Cooper Institute, which I thought every New Yorker knew was for the benefit of such cases. I was greatly surprised to learn that such a thing as the Cooper Institute was not known at that time. I was about to mention it, but I thought I was a little out of my mind. I was very glad to hear that there was a free school here, and I said:

"I would go to the evening school, if I had a penny more, it was such a place."

"A girl who came to the work, complaining of low wages and some of the boys, who they had been unable to collect the amount due them after working, spoke of the mission of the Knights of Labor and the newly organized society for women. They were all surprised to hear that there were any means to aid women in having justice. I moralized somewhat on the use of any such societies unless they entered the heart of these girls."

"The girls who worked on the floor below me said they were not allowed to tell what they earned. However, she had been working here five years, and she did not average more than \$5 a week. The factory itself was a totally unfit place for women. The rooms were small and there was no ventilation. In case of fire there was practically no escape."

"The work was tiresome and after I had learned all I could from the father and sister girls I was anxious to leave. I would like rather, possibly, things on my trip to and from the factory. I noticed that men were much quicker to offer their places to the working girls on the cars than they were to offer them to the girl-colored women. Another thing quite as noticeable, I had more men try to get up a flirtation with me while I was a box factory girl than I ever had before. The girls were

pleasure of doing it, so we did not get as much pay as we would have done if we had not done it."

"What did you do after you left there?" I asked.

"I went to work in a fringe factory on Canal street. A woman had the place and she was very unkind to all the girls. She did not speak English. I worked an entire week, from 8 to 6, with only a half hour for dinner, and at the end of the week she only paid me 25 cents. You know a girl cannot live on 25 cents a week, so I left."

"Do you go to the factory?"

"Well, the bosses seem very kind. They always say good-morning to me, a thing never done in any other place I ever worked, but it is a good deal for a poor girl to give two weeks work for nothing. I have been here almost ten weeks, and I have done a great deal of work. It is all clear gain to the bosses. They say they often dimes a girl after her first two weeks on the piece that she does not suit. After this I am to get \$1.50 a week. The surrounding factories blew at 12 o'clock the forewoman told us we could quit work and eat our lunch. I was not quite so proud of my cleverness in simulating a working girl when one of them said:

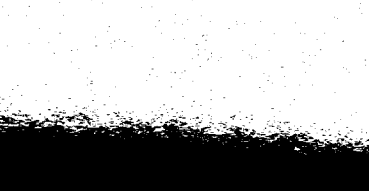
"Do you want to send out for your lunch?"

"No, I brought it with me," I replied.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a knowing infection and amused smile.

"Is there anything wrong?" I asked, answering her smile.

"Oh, no," quickly; "only the girls always make fun of any one who carries a basket now. No working girl will carry a lunch or basket. It is out of style because it marks the girl at once as a worker. I would like to carry a basket, but I don't dare, because they would make so much fun of me."



The girls sent out for lunch and I asked of them the prices. For five cents they got a good pot of coffee, with sugar and milk if desired. Two cents will buy three slices of buttered bread. Three cents a sandwich. Many times a number of the girls will put all their money together and buy quite a little treat. A bowl of soup for five cents will give four girls a taste. By climbing together they are able to buy warm lunch.

At one o'clock we were all at work again. I having completed sixty-four boxes, and the supply being exhausted was put at the moulding table. I was sitting in the bottom row, the side of the box and putting it there. It is rather difficult at first to make all the edges come clearly and neatly together, but after a little experience, it can be done readily."

"On my regularity I was put at a table with some new girls. I tried to get them to talk. I was surprised to find that they are very timid about telling their names, where they live or how. I endeavored by every means a woman knows, to get an invitation to visit their homes, but did not succeed."

"How much can girls earn here?" I asked the forewoman.

"I do not know," she said, "they never tell each other, and the boss keep their time."

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"I get 10 cents a hundred for half pound boxes, and 50 cents a hundred for half pound boxes."

"What work do you do on a box for that pay?"

"Everything. I get the paste-board out in square, the same as you did. I get the top on the box, then it is moulded in the bottom. The forms are

nice in their manners and as polite as ones reared at home. They never forget to thank one another for the slightest service, and there was quite a little air of 'good form' in many of their actions. I have seen many worse girls in much higher positions."

