

My First Job

By Rose Cohen

The narrative begins with Rose explaining how she came upon her first job in America. We pick up her story moments after her father dropped her off for her first day.

“ . . . Now only I felt frightened, and waiting made me nervous, so I tried the knob. The door [opened] heavily and closed slowly. I was half way up when it closed entirely, leaving me in darkness. I [felt] my way to the top of the stairs and hearing a clattering noise of machines; I felt about, found a door, and pushed it open and went in. A tall, beardless man stood folding coats at a table. I went over and asked him for the name [of the man I was supposed to see]. "Yes," he said **crossly** (mean). "What do you want?"

I said, "I am the new **feller hand**." He looked at me from head to foot. My face felt so burning hot that I could [barely] see.

[After asking the Presser if I was the right girl], the **cross** man looked at me again and said, "Let's see what you can do." He kicked a chair, from which the back had been broken off, to the finisher's table, threw a coat upon it and said, raising the corner of his mouth: "Make room for the new feller hand."

One girl [giggled]; two men glanced at me over their shoulders and pushed their chairs apart a little. By this time I scarcely knew what [to do]. I laid my coat down somewhere and pushed my bread into the sleeve. Then I stumbled into the bit of space made for me at the table, drew in the chair and sat down. The men were so close to me at each side I felt the heat of their bodies and could not prevent myself from shrinking away. The men noticed and probably felt hurt. One made a joke, the other laughed and the girls bent their heads low over their work.

My hands trembled so that I could not hold the needle properly. It took me a long while to do the coat. But at last it was done. I took it over to the boss and stood at the table waiting while he was examining it. He took long, trying every stitch with his needle. Finally he put it down and without looking at me gave me two other coats. I felt very happy! When I sat down at the table I drew my knees close together and stitched as quickly as I could.

All day I took my finished work and laid it on the boss's table. He would glance at the clock and give me other work. Before the day was over I knew that this was a "piece work shop," that there were four machines and sixteen people were working. I also knew that I had done almost as much work as "the grown-up girls" and that they did not like me. I heard Betsy, the head feller hand, talking about "a snip of a girl coming and taking the very bread out of your mouth."

Seven o'clock came and everyone worked on. I wanted to rise as father had told me to do and go home. But I had not the courage to stand up alone. I kept putting off going from minute to minute. My neck felt stiff and my back ached. I wished there were a back to my chair so that I could rest against it a little. When the people began to go home it seemed to me that it had been night a long time.

The next morning when I came into the shop at seven o'clock, I saw at once that all the people were there and working steadily as if they had been at work a long while. I had just time to put away my coat and go over to the table, when the boss shouted gruffly, "Look here, girl, if you want to work here you better come in early. No office hours in my shop." It seemed very still in the room, even the machines stopped. And his voice sounded dreadfully distinct. I hastened into the bit of space between the two men and sat down. He brought me two coats and snapped, "Hurry with these!"

From this hour a hard life began for me. He refused to employ me except by the week. He paid me three dollars and for this he hurried me from early until late. He gave me only two coats at a time to do. When I took them over and as he handed me the new work he would say quickly and sharply, "Hurry!" And when he did not say it in words he looked at me and I seemed to hear even more plainly, "Hurry!" I hurried but he was never satisfied. By looks and manner he made me feel that I was not doing enough. Late at night when the people would stand up and begin to fold their work away and I too would rise, feeling stiff in every limb and thinking with dread of our cold empty little room and the uncooked rice, he would come over with still another coat.

"I need it the first thing in the morning," he would give as an excuse. I understood that he was taking advantage of me because I was a child.

I did not complain to father [right away]. When I had been in the shop a few weeks I told him, "The boss is hurrying the life out of me." I know now that if I had [been *less* dramatic] he would have paid *more* attention to it. Father hated to hear things put strongly. Besides he himself worked very hard. He never came home before eleven and he left at five in the morning.

He said to me now, "Work a little longer until you have more experience; then you can be independent."

"But if I did piece work, father, I would not have to hurry so. And I could go home earlier when the other people go."

Father explained further, "It pays him better to employ you by the week. Don't you see if you did piece work he would have to pay you as much as he pays a woman piece worker? But this way he gets almost as much work out of you for half the amount a woman is paid."

I myself did not want to leave the shop for fear of losing a day or even more perhaps in finding other work. To lose half a dollar meant that it would take so much longer before mother and the children would come. And now I wanted them more than ever before. I

longed for my mother and a home where it would be light and warm and she would be waiting when we came from work.

Adapted from the following website:
www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/stein_ootss/ootss_rc.html