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Dr. Robbie Lieberman
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City of Toil
by
Brian Keith Weidert

Spring 1893.

"That door's locked, Miss," called a man pushing a cart full of rags and scrap. Her curious look elicited further explanation. "The factory door is locked from the first bell 'till lunch, then from the lunch bell 'till the work's done. A lot of girls get to leavin' in the middle of their shifts and never tellin' nobody."

"So they lock them in?" She asked indignantly.

"You know women." The man said too naturally. He paused and reconsidered his tone. "I mean nothin' by it, Miss. A lot of young girls like yourself aren't so used to this kind of work and a lot of 'em take to wantin' to run back home. The doors aren't locked so much to keep them from leavin' but to maybe give 'em a reason to stay."

She made no response and the combined look of shock and anger written on her face led the man to offer a bit of uncharacteristic encouragement. "Now don't mind nothin' 'bout that door. Inside there's good work and good wages. Down on the corner," he said, pointing, "is a boarding house where you can sit and have a cup of coffee and some bread. Sit a spell then come back here at the end of the lunch break. Once you're inside I'm sure you'll find work." Feeling better about himself the man pushed his cart past the woman and soon disappeared from her sight and thoughts.

His suggestion remained however and her weary feet, complaining after yet another fruitless morning searching for work, led her to the intersection of Gammet Boulevard and East street. There she found a building made of brown stone sitting like an ugly bully, topped with an excess of crooked irregular chimneys. A painted sign declared the building the "Revival Friendship House." True to his word she was able to buy a cup of strong black coffee and a chunk of German black bread for only a four cents. The common room was nearly empty and she sat under a grime-covered window and kicked off her shoes.

"Did you make those or buy those?" Asked a man near her. She looked up at him. He was in his early thirties; malnourished, obviously fatigued and wanting for sleep, yet still somehow handsome with his European features and clear expressive eyes. He motioned to her shoes and spoke with a heavy French accent. "You'll need the best pair of shoes you can buy or fashion yourself to make it in this city. Not a flat sidewalk or street without all manner of pits and hazards anywhere to be found here." He smiled at her quizzical look.

"My name is Louis Guilimard. I'm a Doctor." He wiped his hand on a cotton square of cloth he held in his lap and extended it to her.

"My name is Charlotte Perkins."

"I mean it about the shoes," he said, rising. "My work takes me into a lot of the factories in this neighborhood. I see so many young women like yourself wearing the height of fashionable footwear. Not a single shoe among the whole lot of them designed to be walked in and certainly not stood in all day." He walked around his table and half bowed in front of her. "Just a word of advice." With that he left the common room and her to her thoughts.

She chuckled when she thought again of his observation a few minutes after his departure. Now that she had heard the words said aloud she knew them to be true; ever since she had arrived on the train from the small town of Perry she had not experienced more than a five foot stretch of passable land in all of New York City.

'Is that how it's going to be then?' she asked herself. She had arrived with five dollars and the high spirits of one who was at the helm of her own life for the first time. She had heard countless testimonies of the plentiful jobs awaiting women of all walks of life, whether they possessed skill in a trade, or if they had never before worked a wage-earning job, which most women hadn't.

Yet all of her predecessors had returned from the city after short stays, their wanderlust spent. Their vigilant correspondence with the young man who had earlier been introduced to them by a friend of the family, parent, or neighbor, had borne fruit and now that the city had revealed all of its charms it was time to marry and begin an "honest" life as a housewife and mother. A life which would be enriched with the endless recycling of the sights, sounds, hardships, and pleasures of their "time in the city."

As an adolescent Charlotte loved listening to her older sisters and their friends recount stories of fancy dress balls, themed socials that challenged the imagination, and men, countless men vying for a woman's attention. Where she became defeated was when one girl stated with an air of superiority that, "It certainly isn't any kind of *real* life; living like that, for yourself, that is," followed by a round of agreeing nods.

Charlotte did not return to the factory with the locked doors. She bought a newspaper on the way back to the small room she had rented for three and one half dollars a week. When she had first arrived she was relieved to see column

after column of calls for young ladies to come to work. She would find out that the ads were misleading.

Many employers kept ads in the papers year round whether they had openings or not. Business owners figured they could always put a woman to work knowing she might soon enough quit or another might leave. Either way they lost little if a new applicant left after a day or a few hours, which was very common. They lost less if a higher paid worker quit and a new worker was already present to fill her shoes on less wages.

The jobs listed varied widely yet they could be lumped into two separate categories, those suitable for men and those left for women. Out of the jobs available to women two more distinction could be made, skilled or unskilled. Charlotte had grown up on a farm and worked next to her Father and brother. She helped her Mother and sisters care for the house and hardly considered herself an untried laborer devoid of skill. Yet this was how she was viewed by prospective employers.

Because of the bias all ads that mentioned "skill" she forced herself to ignore. This discouragement caused her an acute spell of depression as she was confident she could learn most trades in a matter of days. Yet with the competition she faced, especially from immigrant women, who had often applied much of their youth to some trade or other, she need not bother to apply.

This left her with less opportunity than she would have liked but far more than she could have found in Perry. Many of the unskilled jobs listed called for such domestic service as to attend to proper ladies, read aloud to blind gentlemen of good standing, or help invalids keep house. Other ads offered all manner of jobs as receptionists in Doctor's offices, Dentist's offices, and so on. This was the easy kind of work Charlotte could have found at home and it did not appeal to her because of its banal nature.

The bulk of the remaining unskilled work was in the garment district. She would begin there early the next morning. One ad in particular caught her attention. The ad read; "Keating and Schiff Theatrical and Military Costume Makers require hand sewers for custom-made garments. Apply at 1482 Clark St., Lower East Side."

The next day she rose before the sun and began her walk to the garment

district. She applied for every job she could but was turned down repeatedly on the account that she had never operated a Singer sewing machine. At a quarter past nine she arrived at Keating and Schiff. The doors were not locked and she entered the small factory. She found herself in a waiting room. At the back of the room was a door with no window and next to it a staircase that led to yet another door. To the left of the entrance was a sliding glass window which was open.

"Good morning, Miss." Called a youngish woman through the open partition.

"Good morning," replied Charlotte. "I'm here about the ad in the paper."

The woman smiled. "Ever do any sewing before?" She asked.

"On every one of my Father's and brother's pants, shirts, socks, and whatever else they wore. I also made my own dresses and...." She was prepared to continue but the woman waved her off.

"If you can wait, I'll fetch Mr. Keating to come speak to you." The woman motioned to one of the couches. After five minutes the door at the top of the stairs opened and a handsome man in his forties emerged, stopping at the top step. He looked over Charlotte then smiled and descended the rest of the steps.

"I'm Mr. Keating," he said, offering his hand. "You are?"

"Ms. Charlotte Perkins. It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir."

"Well, come then, I'll show you the floor and tell you a bit about what it is we do here." He spoke while he walked and led her through the other door in the room. Mr. Keating struck her as an amiable man. It surprised Charlotte that he seemed to know so little about his own business. Many things he pointed at he was at a loss to fully explain. "Oh, that's something for a play," he would mumble. "Svetlana knows," he said, waving off his ignorance.

"I'm not really made for business," he professed. "My partner, Jacob Schiff, he's the genius at making money." Keating, it seemed, had nobler ambitions. He had enjoyed an exciting career as a stage actor and director yet he found living such a life unrewarding financially. To quell his wife's complaints he secured funding through the banking enterprises of Schiff and began making costumes for the stage. This grew into a rather successful business when the United States Army contracted Keating and Schiff to fabricate their Officer's Ceremonial uniforms.

Mr. Keating left Charlotte at a broad table where a group of women were

cutting fabric. Charlotte fell quickly to the tasks and by lunch she was positive she would do well in the factory. Her pay was three dollars and twenty five cents a week while training which rose to four and a half dollars when she no longer required direct supervision. Like all of the women employed at Keating and Schiff she would work from seven in the morning until six at night Monday through Friday, with twenty minutes for lunch and two five minute breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Everyone worked five hours on Saturday in which the whole factory was cleaned and any remain task for the week completed.

* * * * *

The fits of laughter alerted her to the fact that she had been caught eyeing the square of angel food cake. She held an apple in her hand and she couldn't have been more disgusted.

"Come sit with us, sis." Called a ruddy-skinned woman with a lopsided smile. "First day?" Her co-worker announced more than asked. "Sit down, sit down. No formalities here." The women at the table smiled; especially when they saw the crook in her wrist as if the apple were ready to drop from her grasp.

"Yes, this is my first day here." Charlotte answered. She sat at a spot cleared for her and placed her lunch bag down on the wooden table top.

"What's your name?" Inquired a box-shouldered woman with short brown hair who spoke with a heavy Polish accent.

"Charlotte," she replied.

"My name is Bella, that's Rosalie," she said pointing to a thin, short, blue-eyed woman who hid crooked teeth behind a shy smile. "Ann," a blonde woman smiled and nodded, "and Katerina," a tall and plump woman looked up at the mention of her name.

"Here, I've got some cake. I was saving it for break but you can have it. My name is Nattily," interrupted the same woman who had called her over. "You're from a farm, aren'tcha?" When Charlotte nodded 'yes' she too nodded as if she already knew the answer.

"We learn how to eat that way in the country, don't we? You got an apple tree on the farm?" She did not wait for a reply before continuing. "A big apple tree I bet. Vegetables, cows, chickens...you've got it all? How many acres? Big,

huh? Yeah, real big I bet. You've probably got a mess of siblings? Me too, me too. Well, I've been here a year and I try to eat like I used to but after standing in the heat all day I don't feel hungry for nothin' but sweets." She paused for a breath while her eyes smiled at her co-workers. "Pickles, cakes, sweet rolls, coffee, that's about all we eat, isn't it ladies?"

"It's all I ever want to eat!" Joked Bella.

"Oh, we could get anything we want here," continued Nattily, "there's sandwiches and soups, see?" She motioned with her head to the front of the room. "Not many places this small have a cafeteria, you know. We only have to pay fifteen cents a day to eat. That includes coffee and bread for breakfast, that lunch spread and a lot of girls sneak something out for dinner too, but I suppose Mr. Keating knows, as such." All of the women at the table nodded in agreement.

"And he doesn't care?" Asked Charlotte.

"Mr. Keating?" Nattily raised an eyebrow. "No, not Mr. Keating." She looked around. "He's usually here at lunch. Sit more than two people together and he'll be around soon enough." She chuckled, "You'll see what I mean."

"Svetlana's gone too." Whispered Rosalie. At the mention of the name the women grew quiet.

Nattily looked out from under the arch of her brow at Charlotte. "Do everything you can to stay out of the way of that one," she warned in grave tones. Nothing more was said and for the next few minutes the women ate in silence. Eventually their laughter began again and the name and demeanor of Svetlana was forgotten.

The day went quickly with Charlotte applying herself to several different tasks, none of which were completely unfamiliar to her. Choosing to heed the warning given to her she did not speak to Svetlana although the supervisor stood over her and watched her work on several occasions. Charlotte found she did not need to be warned against the Romanian émigré. The woman's presence stalked the factory floor like a vengeful ghost. She silenced conversations, set normally steady hands to trembling, and lowered even the most resolute gaze.

It was not until Charlotte punched her time card early the following morning that Svetlana spoke directly to her. "You came back," she accused. "I suppose you think this place is quite charming. Just so you know, Keating is soft,

but I'm not. You'd be smart to note which of the two of us is in charge of this place."

The second day passed much as the first. Her pace was expected to quicken and more work was given to her. She took to it as well as she could but she found herself fatigued by lunch and dead tired by the ringing of the final bell. Her new friends, who insisted she work at their table, seemed just as fatigued as she had but the ringing of the final bell had a curious effect on them. As the women stepped away from their work they filled with life and energy and practically danced their way out of the front door; their voices singing with tales of the men they would pursue that evening.

"Won't you join us, sis?" Asked Bella in a jovial voice.

"Oh, I'd like to, but..."

"To tired?" Nattily laughed. "She doesn't have her legs yet. Let's go, ladies, I heard there having a social in the park by the Kenneth building and I ain't even bought a dress yet." Charlotte did not join her new friends. Her whole body was racked with pain from head to foot. She could think of nothing but a warm bath followed by a good nights sleep.

* * * * *

Upon moving to the Lower East Side Charlotte took up residence in a featureless square brick building that on the first floor held a casket maker's workshop. Across the street was a popular dress and fashion boutique which sold copies of European designs that were all the rave. Above this store was an apartment in which several women had set up a business cutting and styling women's hair. The street was always active except for at the dead of night.

Charlotte found out quickly that almost no one sat alone in their small rooms nor did they entertain in them unless some measure of secrecy or privacy was required. Everything in the Lower East Side happened in the streets. Those that did stay in their rooms usually hung their heads out of their windows to watch what their neighbors were doing so it could be said that while not physically present their minds and senses had never left.

The noise of the street poured in through her window. It was a cacophony

of laughter, shouting, crying, and carrying on. It was a new and curious sound to her, the sound of the city, and it begged for her attention. Unfortunately for her the complaints of her sore and swollen feet and calves was much more persistent. She began a quest to find some hot water for that long deserved bath.

There was not often hot water in the evenings. In the mornings the house matron or one of her neighbors left a pail of hot water outside of her door. This was used to wash up in the morning. Charlotte would find out that one was left to their own devices as far as washing went in the evening.

In buildings with more permanent tenants neighbors took turns heating and dispensing water to those who desired it. In Charlotte's building this was not done. Upon realizing this she gave up on her hopes for hot water or a bath, hot water or not, and returned to her room. The room Charlotte had rented was a rectangle just big enough for a small bed, a small dresser, a small chair, and a small window. The bathroom was down the hall and not even that had a bathtub.

"That's enough!" The angry voice of the House Matron boomed down the hall into her room. Charlotte stuck her head out to discern what was taking place. "Did you think you could get away with this sort of thing here? I didn't have to use my imagination when figuring out how you made your rent, what with the noises you make." The House Matron's hulking frame filled the hall as a stopper fills the opening of a jug. She was yelling at someone Charlotte could not see.

"And you, what are you supposed to be? Some sort of fancy? With those cheap shoes and that filthy hat? How old are you? Not yet old enough that I can't send you back to your mother with a red hind end! To the streets with both of you. I'll have no women bumming in my house." She pivoted away from the pair, her elbows scrapping plaster off of the walls and headed down the hallway towards Charlotte.

"What do you want?" She asked, not slowing.

"Hot water?" Charlotte eked out.

"Humph! Hot water! Can't you see I have more important things to attend to?"

Charlotte had to step back into her room to let the woman pass. She immediately stuck her head out of the door and looked to see who the woman was haranguing. A young man, probably not yet eighteen, leaned against one wall with an amused smile on his face. He was indeed a dapper young man with a

stylish suit, leather shoes, and a felt hat held in one hand, his hair neatly parted. When he saw Charlotte looking at him he pushed himself off of the wall with a shrug of his shoulder and walked towards her.

"Eh, how are ya?" He smiled.

"Better than you, I imagine." Charlotte studied him closer and saw that his suit was indeed shabby, his shoes worn, and his hat stained.

"Oh, her," he said, glancing at the House Matron as she stormed away. "I don't live here. It means nothin' to me." He pressed by Charlotte and casually walked down the hall. After traveling a few feet he turned to regard Charlotte who was watching him pass. He flashed a fox's grin.

When he had disappeared down the stairs Charlotte went to the room of the young lady who had been put into the street. She found her sitting on the windowsill smoking a long thin cigarette. She was just a girl, in her mid teens, very thin with almost no muscle or fat to speak of. Her long pale-yellow hair was dirty and tangled. She wore only a filthy cotton slip.

"Is everything okay?" Charlotte asked. The girl turned and regarded Charlotte with a look of puzzlement.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"My name is Charlotte. I took the room down the hall."

"Oh, right. I seen you before, the day you moved in." The girl resumed looking out of the window. She did not speak again to Charlotte which only made her seem still more mysterious.

"Do you have a place to go?"

The girl turned with yet another quizzical look on her face, surprised to see Charlotte still standing in her doorway.

"Huh?"

"It's late, where will you stay?"

"Oh, that. Right, I won't leave 'till mornin.' This ain't the only rat's nest in this town. Should be easy enough to come across another."

"Well, okay, I was just..."

"Sit down already." The girl scolded Charlotte, pointing to the bed. "You're not from around here, are ya?" She asked.

"No, I'm from..."

"What are ya workin' somewhere?" The girl continued.

"Yes, at..."

"Yeah, a workin' girl. I gotcha. I used do work too. I had me a real crap job takin' in fancy linens and things for repair. Not no more. I wised up quick to that scheme." The girl laughed and her mood instantly improved. She pinched the end of her cigarette off and set the remainder of her smoke on the dresser. She then tossed herself on the bed next to Charlotte.

"You got a man?"

"No, I..."

"Yeah, I getcha, you been scroungin' for some coin. Right? Right. Gonna earn your own keep for awhile. Tired of daddy?" She smiled. "Don't pass off that look. I ain't sayin' nothin.' I was there too. Not by choice. There's plenty of work in this town. Plenty. Not a damn second of it worth your time, believe me. What? Not afraid? So you're used to hard work, huh? Okay, who isn't? What your dear papa earns he takes to the corner pub? He's got a wife, right, your mum? She's scrubbing her knuckles raw on some washboard in some tiny room, in some ugly building, a dozen little brats--those things you call siblings--kicking and screaming at one another." She looked at Charlotte and weighed her mood.

"No, not you. Look at the color of your skin, hot damn, you've been out in the sun! A farm, is it? Been seein' al sorts coming into this here city. I knew a woman shoveled coal sixteen hours a day to move her ride across the ocean so she could come here and work for four and a quarter when rents three and a half." She slapped her knee. "But you should've seen her arms!" She laughed uproariously and her queer manners made Charlotte laugh herself. The girl stood and took up her cigarette, lit it, and began to pace around the room.

"I like you and we're neighbors so I'm gonna give you the straight scoop. A woman's gotta make it on her own. We know that. If a man ain't hittin' ya or kickin' ya he's out with some other broad. Right? Right. So you can't count on that play to come through. Maybe those country boys of yours are different, and if they are, you need to go back to where you came from. But here," she said, pointing down to the floor, "in this here city ain't no man gonna do nothin' for you, babe. Sorry to be the one write the headline. So listen up.

"Ain't no woman ever gonna own nothin.' Ain't no woman that can put other women to work and pay 'em anything they could live on. The men got all the money and they only share it with each other, and if you don't know by now, I'll

tell ya, the rich don't like sharin' with the poor, men or not. So you and me, babe, we're at the very bottom of it all." She plopped down on the bed, exhausted.

"So here is how I figure it. Don't let this hit ya as rude, it is just the plain truth as best as I can tell. I got somethin' men want and men want bad. I don't think I need to fill you in on what I'm talkin' 'bout, do I? Good. Now these men, they got somethin' I need, and I need it bad. I'm not talkin' 'bout that ugly thing they got stickin' out 'o the front of them, either, I'm talkin' 'bout money.

"So I'm a 'bum' she says. I trade what I got for what they got. It ain't pretty but it ain't too bad neither. Once I'm gone that old beast will be talkin' this house up against me, sayin' how I was a sweet honest hard workin' girl what went bad. Humph!" She waved her arm in front of her as if casting away a bothersome bug.

"I pulled in all those fancy silks and lace from all those rich broads. I used to sit her from daybreak 'till days end and I still didn't have nothin' for myself, certainly no fine silks. Now you tell me, how did those rich broads get so lucky? They don't work. They don't do nothin'." She looked out of the corner of her eye at Charlotte. "Right? Don't be fooled. Those 'ladies' cut the very path I'm walkin' down and they did it right. They were born lucky and they latched on to some rich fella. They only have to bum it out to one man." She got up and walked to the window to ash her cigarette.

"But I figure they is just like slaves. But me, well, look here." She leaned under her bed and pulled out a hat box which she cracked open so that Charlotte could see inside. What Charlotte saw was a wad of bills bunched up so tight it bowed out the sides of the box. "This is all mine. I got fancy clothes too, just like them broads in Paris. Hats shaped like birds and all the rest of it. So see now, tomorrow morning I'll wake up real early and be on my way, wherever I please." She shoved the box back under her bed and stood up triumphantly.

"Maybe I do bum around. Right? You can say what you want 'bout that, sure. But I got what no other woman has. No man can call me his property. No man can boss me around. No man can take my money and spend it on himself. I got the whole world on my terms. It's what you want, even if you don't know it yet." She looked out of the window. "Otherwise why would a broad like you come here?"

Charlotte stayed with the girl a bit longer, listening to her stories. It was pretty obvious that her philosophy was flawed but it also had something to it.

Charlotte fell asleep that night trying to comprehend what it was her younger neighbor seemed to believe with such unshakable conviction. She did not figure it out before sleep took her. The next day at Keating and Schiff she realized that as she worked with her own hands for her own wages that the girl was right; she definitely did want the world on her own terms.

* * * * *

She lumbered up the steps after another long and exhausting day at Keating and Schiff. It was not so much that the work was hard, it wasn't. It was the pace, relentless with few breaks and the conditions, concrete floors and cramped workstations, which were unnatural. She was halfway to the top when she remembered the advice that French Doctor had given her, to wear good shoes. At that very moments she decided to buy a proper pair of work shoes when she received her pay.

At the top of the stairs was a common room with a gas stove and several comfortable chairs. This room was shared by all of the tenants and was not only warm and comfortable, which could scarcely be said of the tenant's rooms, but it was also a fine place to sit, gossip and drink hot coffee while enjoying more quiet than the stoop allowed. After snacking on a bit of food she had brought home from work and changing into a clean dress Charlotte walked down to the common room to sit before the stove.

"Names Ridley," announced a dirty-faced boy whose tiny frame all but disappeared in one of the chairs.

"Hello Ridley my name is Charlotte. Do you live in this building with your parents?"

"I ain't got no parents." Answered the boy with not a touch of sadness in his voice. "I live here sometimes. Sometimes I sleep in the factory where I work. I ain't working no more." He leaned up in his chair and extended his hand towards Charlotte. "Look here, I cut my fingers so they don't want me no more. It was their stupid machine what did it to me."

Charlotte examined the boy's hand. He had a deep wide cut across the pads of four of his fingers, lurid in color, with exposed tissue. The boy seemed delighted at her shocked expression.

"The Doctor with the funny name he came and cleaned it all out for me and wrapped it up. But I got the wrappings dirty already and I lost the others he gave me, or someone stole 'em." He looked at his hand with a morbid curiosity. "I wonder how long I'll be out of work." He asked himself.

"Don't be bleeding all over that chair!" Came the now familiar voice of the House Matron. "You left these lyin' in the damn hallway." She tossed the lost wrappings in the boy's lap and dropped her weight in the chair next to Charlotte. She rolled her eyes around the room and hacked up a wad of phlegm which she spit on the floor. She seemed to do this purely to discomfort Charlotte. She then turned her attention back to the boy.

"Where's all your damn thieving friends?" The boy pretended not to hear her.

"Out in the damn streets I bet. Lord knows if I find another stolen wallet in here I'm turnin' the whole lot of you filthy beast over to the police. Don't you think I won't. A hell of a lot of good you bastards do me anyway. Your parents ran off and left you behind. Didn't you get duped?" She laughed.

Charlotte looked the lady full in the face hoping to make eye contact so that she could show her displeasure at the woman's vulgar language and cruel demeanor. The house matron, aware of this, drew some obvious enjoyment from Charlotte's anger and instead of making any amends instead took out her false teeth and examined them in the light.

"Necklace." The boy mumbled. At the mention of jewelry the House Matron smiled her toothless smile. She re-inserted her teeth into her mouth and pulled a necklace from the depths of the chasm between her enormous breast. It was the worse kind of junk made quickly and poorly for those who knew nothing about art or beauty. The woman eyed it with adoration.

"It is a charming piece. I doubt there are many quite like it. Where'd you find it," she asked the boy, her tone becoming accusatory.

"Sean found it. In the street." This, while an obvious lie, seemed to mollify the woman.

"I feel sorry for the poor sucker who lost this. Not another quite like it." She drifted off into her own world of sparking facets and shimmering silver. Not finding any peace in the common room Charlotte went to her own room and lie down.

* * * * *

"Good morning Charlotte," said Mr. Keating as she walked through the front door. He was leaning against the wall next to the secretaries window with the mornings paper in hand. "We've got a big order in today. The Milikin Theatre is doing Merchant of Venice. There are plenty of stock costumes around for any Shakespeare but we have received all of the size alterations for the actors and we will need to make changes accordingly. Svetlana will handle the details, of course." He slapped the paper against his thigh.

"Shakespeare is in vogue this season," he said with delight. "That's good for business. Those costumes are so complex, you know? You ladies ought to be pleased. Plenty of shows to attend. Many of the men that work in this neighborhood love to invite my girls to these shows. I think they try to project a bit of culture yet I wonder if these men truly enjoy Shakespeare." He smiled at his own humor.

Keating and Schiff did have many machine sewers yet as a selling point and perhaps also as a point of pride the business emphasized that every garment received personal attention by a skilled hand sewer. There were five tables of hand sewers and Charlotte and several of her friends occupied one table.

Charlotte soon learned that she had been quite lucky to enter Keating and Schiff as a hand sewer. The women who sat at the Singer sewing machines worked in isolation, their attention focused on the workings of the machine, their conversations with the woman next to them drowned out by the piercing whirl of row after row of the buzzing contraptions. They rose only for breaks in which they did nothing but stretch, walk, and talk to as many people as possible before resuming their partnership with the untiring machine.

Charlotte, Nattily, Bella, Rosalie, Ann and Katerina sat at a long and wide rectangular table and sewed together. Their conversations were enjoyable and rarely interfered with their work. Svetlana hated the set up. She bothered the hand sewers more than the machine sewers. She seemed to hover over their conversations as if she suspected a mutiny at any second.

"Let me see that." Demanded Svetlana of Charlotte as she sewed a corset. "Who told you to use this stitch?" She held the garment out as if it were evidence

in a trial.

"No one told me," Charlotte answered. "I use that stitch when making dresses. It should work."

"Everything here is made a certain way and this is not the way we make it. This is all wrong. Pull all these stitches and redo it. You should thank your co-workers for not helping you like they should have. They've wasted your time." She tossed the corset on the table and walked away. When she became occupied in berating another hand sewer the girls began their complaints.

"Don't pull those," whispered Nattily. "Your work is fine. She's just sizing you up."

It went like this for awhile. Charlotte was amazed at the amount of work the women at Keating and Schiff could get done in a single day. It seemed every theatre in New York City sent their orders to them and like a hive of bees they worked tirelessly until every garment was finished. Charlotte thought them magnificent. They used fine silks imported from China and Egypt. They used satins from Italy. And even the most mundane wools and cottons were transformed into the garb of Kings, Queens, courtesans, and soldiers.

While the work did fatigue her the camaraderie enlivened her. While she did have two older sisters and many friends back home the women she worked with were different. They came from all over the world. They each had different traditions, different cultures, even different languages, yet they shared work and in the hours of toil at Keating and Schiff the women all realized that they also shared many of the burdens and joys of life despite their differences.

Charlotte spent hours listening to her co-workers talk. Ann loved to describe the beauty of the Swiss Alps or the congenial nature of the men there. Katerina spoke about the hardships of life in the rural Russian countryside yet no one was made to feel pity for her. She spoke with a certain love for her homeland that made each of her friends promise that one day they would visit her there should she ever move back home.

Rosalie did not often speak but was often spoke about. She was tremendously shy yet when under the influence of spirits she took great delight in the advances of men and never seemed to want for company. This amused the women who enjoyed imagining their quiet withdrawn co-worker in the throes of passion.

Bella laughed at it all and in her unassuming way refused to speak of herself. She was always turning the conversation over to another. When she did speak she revealed herself to be a sincerely patriotic woman who loved America. Bella was a first generation American, born to Polish immigrants. Although she was raised in a Polish neighborhood and had little contact with other Americans while growing up she adopted what she perceived to be the strengths of the every-American; hard work, self sacrifice, and purity of character.

Nattily was perhaps the most difficult one to get along with at first. She spoke over others, she assumed much she was not told, and she loved to put words in the mouths of her friends. Despite these faults she was almost comical with her behavior. She seemed not to mean any of it in a spirit of meanness. After a time it was obvious that her poor social etiquette came from deep feelings of insecurity which made her friends feel they should take steps to protect her.

Nattily was full of energy and challenged the others to keep up. She drove away pain and fatigue with the flights of her imagination. She was constantly talking about new fashions, European trends, important social engagements which were coming up and men, most especially men. It seemed her life's mission to find everyone of her friends not only a steady beau but also as many men as they wanted on the side. Her fantastic imagination made the women forget about the dull nature of their work and after a time Charlotte herself was able to shrug off the weight of the day and partake in these flights of fancy. She learned in time that many of the women, especially those who did not work to support children, worked hard through the day largely to earn money to enjoy their evenings...and what evenings they had.

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The Clark Street Amphitheater was only a year old. The empty lot which it occupied had only two years earlier played host to a terrific battle of ideas between two beloved New York architects. Up to that point they had spent their entire careers working more or less in tandem. By 1891 they had each matured considerably, albeit in different directions. Each realized the other was changing yet the loyalty they owed one another kept the working relationship together, perhaps longer than was healthy.

Antonio Brugaldi was a believer in the stylistic school of Henry Robinson Richardson whose architecture would, in the years after his death in 1887, spawn a movement of mimicry that bore his name; Richardsonian Romanesque. Richardson had studied in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He was one of the most admired American architects alive or dead and Antonio had studied, for a brief time, directly under the man.

The amphitheatre, as Brugaldi envisioned it, would express its mass in a simple unadorned way with a touch of the Romanesque found in the arched windows and a solid strength communicated through a use of large-cut stone and rustic masonry. The vision was sound and if built it would no doubt hold its own and perhaps even become beloved by the inhabitants of the neighborhood and the city at large. It made Eugene Erensborg wretch to imagine it.

Erensborg, like many architects of his time, had been caught in the artistic wake of the London Crystal Palace of 1850. While Erensborg himself was only three months old when the Crystal Palace had been built he was one of many intellectual progeny of Joseph Paxton, the designer of the Palace. Despite the fact that the technology used to make the Crystal Palace had been around for over five decades its use was considered unnecessarily risky, even flagrant, by some, as steel had not yet proven its superiority over masonry either from a technological point of view or from a stylistic point of view.

Erensborg sought to change all that. He believed in steel. He saw glass and the space it provided as a much neglected spiritual component in building. Erensborg imagined the amphitheatre as a comment on the machine age. New York City was quickly becoming a city like no other. Like London was to England, in America, New York City was the "city on the hill" of the industrial age. It was his belief that if architecture could not voice the spirit of this new age than architecture was a dead art and architects themselves capable only of re-hashing dead ideas.

Erensborg spoke so passionately and with such force that the normally reserved and contemplative Brugaldi was drawn into a argument in which only one of two endings was assured; one architect would begrudgingly concede to the other and the artistic collaboration that had seemingly always existed would be over, or neither would concede and a friendship which had enriched the lives of both would be over. Brugaldi saw this fact more clearly than Erensborg and in the

true spirit of friendship he provided just enough resistance to temper his friend's ideas while subjugating his own ego for the sake of the other.

Brugaldi would take a competing offer to build a downtown department store leaving Erensburg to create the Clark Street Amphitheatre. The friendship would continue although not as strongly as before. The Clark Street Amphitheatre would indeed comment on the modern age with exposed steel supports and a glass concourse which was truly miraculous for its time. The building was lyrical and poetic in an age of stone monoliths. It was a large building that felt intimate. The Clark Street Amphitheatre would stand for only thirty years. It would die at the hands of further modernity. Room was made for the automobile.

One full year after the opening of the amphitheatre on Clark Street the Society for the Social Engagement of Laboring Women held its first ever themed ball. The ballroom was decorated to resemble the L'Opera in Paris complete with a reproduction of Garnier's grand staircase. Those who were in attendance were encouraged to dress in the height of Parisian fashion and Charlotte and her co-workers spent a week window shopping and another week in heated debate over the proper attire. Finally they took every cent they had labored for and managed to save through painful sacrifice and went shopping.

As the women marched from store to store intent on assembling a host of outfits that would steal the show from competing groups it dawned on Charlotte that theirs was a paradoxical mission. Each of them spent eleven hours a day hand crafting more elaborate garments than they were buying. It seemed silly to buy something one could make at much less cost. Yet it was a thrill to shop for oneself. The dresses, gloves, hats, shoes and scarves Charlotte and her friends looked at, tried on, and purchased were poorly made, even shabby and of no practical use outside of the ballroom. The prices asked for such items were scandalous yet none of the women were dismayed by this.

Each woman knew that on the surface it appeared they wasted their wages. What each woman also knew was that they, perhaps for the first time in history, had worked for their own wages and without having to ask permission from anyone but themselves turned around and "wasted" that money, their money, on completely frivolous junk. The feeling was intoxicating and this intoxication

lasted from the moment of purchase to the moment the ball ended. If one kept the outfit the feeling could be revived with a glance and re-lived just by adorning the clothes again, although the feeling would, in time, fade, which prompted one to do it all over again.

The whole experience of the ball, from the preparation two weeks before, to the retelling and embellishing of events for weeks after, was one of the most joyous periods in Charlottes life up to that point. The music, the dancing, the men, her friends, most especially the camaraderie of her friends, filled Charlotte with happiness. Keating and Schiff was buzzing with news of the event for quite awhile until Svetlana grew so angry over the joy others felt in her absence that she killed the mood with her scornful looks.

The women all awaited the next big event. In the meantime there were innumerable smaller events to attend such as outdoor luncheons, plays, concerts, and so on. The women even organized their own events which they hosted in the rented meeting hall of a large and popular pub. Here they held dance practice, read aloud to one another their personal poetry or had a guest speaker lecture on any topic of interest; with art, literature, and culture being the women's favorite topics. The content of these sessions would be spoken of the next day at work. While the women may have spent the majority of their time in rather mindless toil they, largely through their own efforts, saw to their own personal enrichment and education. Theirs was a rich life. As rich as they could make it.

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"A fine presentation, Dr. Guilimard," praised Charlotte after several women had done likewise. The Doctor nodded his welcome. When well rested and properly nourished the French Doctor was strikingly handsome. He spoke with refinement, humor and charm and it was obvious why the ladies had invited him to speak. "Do you recall that we have met before?" Inquired Charlotte.

"I meet so many people. Please forgive me." He smiled apologetically.

"You advised me to buy a sensible pair of shoes."

This brought a smile to his handsome face. "I beg so many yet so few follow my advise. Dare I?" He cast a sidelong glance at Charlotte's shoes. "Ah, perhaps I have made a convert at last. In the future I shall have more faith."

"Sorry to interrupt, dear," said one of the event's organizers, placing a hand on Charlotte's shoulder. "Dr. Guilimard. It was a pleasure to hear you speak. Myself and some of the ladies were curious if you are still needing volunteers for your humanitarian efforts?"

"Always." He replied.

"Good, several of us ladies would like to help. If you'd be so gracious as to give us the details before you depart." She nodded and left to speak to other guest.

"Humanitarian efforts?" Asked Charlotte. The Doctor smiled.

"I'm sure you've noticed this neighborhoods many children?" Charlotte nodded that she had. "Too many of them have been orphaned through one means or another. Many do not have permanent homes. I try my best to feed and clothe them when I can and see to any medical needs but I am only one man. Often I approach societies and interested groups like this to help; especially in providing clothing and shoes." He laughed at himself. "It's always shoes with me!" He exclaimed in mock seriousness.

He saw that Charlotte was intrigued. "My office is on Henry Street. If you have time and the inclination please stop in. The children can always use help." Charlotte agreed that she would. Their conversation was again interrupted as the Doctor was pulled away to speak to a wealthy supporter of the group.

Charlotte and Dr. Guilimard did not have a chance to speak again that night but she would in a few days hence go to see him in his office where she found him sleeping in a rather uncomfortable looking sofa, fatigued and malnourished from his selfless overexertion. It was obvious to her that the Doctor needed someone to look out for his health. She volunteered herself to that particular humanitarian effort.

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"Ladies!" Shouted Keating as he burst through the front door and took up his orators post at the head of the room. "It dawned on me just this afternoon that here you sew and work fabric but do you not also sew the seeds of our future and tend to the fabric of this nation's morality?" The women at Charlotte's table all exchanged amused and knowing looks. Mr. Keating was still a stage actor at heart. He had added to that role the role of mentor to every woman under his

employ. He would often bother their work with long rambling soliloquies.

"You do! The world is often morally reprehensible and the simple affair of living in it often leads men towards meanness, vile thoughts, or a lack of hope. Commerce is at best indifferent and can often be ruthless. Men who engage in it risk losing their souls. Human history is plagued with war, as even now the Spanish massacre the Cubans. Certainly the young courageous men of this nation will be called to their aid. What saves these men? What gives these men the courage to fight and die? You!

"We operate in this often grim and depressing world knowing that our women, for whom we do everything, for whom no sacrifice is too great, are pure in thought and action." He strode down the isles broadcasting his enthusiastic smile to his audience whose work kept them captive.

"Many of you come from distant lands with cultures unlike our own. Yet what I speak of transcends cultural differences." He looked around the large room like a father might look a house full of his daughters.

"I know that this great nation remains great because men sacrifice moral behavior to do what needs to be done knowing that the purity of their home is held secure by the women they cherish. Many of you are young, away from the influence of your parents for the first time. I take it upon myself to continue their good work. This city has many vices. There are those who have designs on you my dears. There are, regrettably, those forces that prey on your purity."

"If only he knew," whispered Nattily, "just how pure we've all been keeping ourselves." The women muffled their snickers.

"This work you do is fine work. These skills are skills you learned from your mothers who learned them from their mothers. These skills you shall take to your husband's home to pass on to your own daughters. I know many of you take the wages you earn here to your fathers or brothers. I know many of you support younger siblings and I applaud your hard work as they do. As much as I am filled with pride at employing so many industrious ladies I do not want any of you to think of this factory as your final destination in life.

"Many more of you work for yourselves and spend your wages as you like. Good! You are young and full of energy. You're in the world and you shall be the wiser for it. Whatever your fancy and however long you decide to work and play do not allow yourselves to pass up your true calling as mother and wife. Men

without wives and children are men destined to lose themselves to ruinous behavior or profound depression. A woman who can have children but who refuses, that is women who live only for themselves, do a great disservice to the destiny of this nation. "

Finally Svetlana's annoyed looks caught the attention of Mr. Keating who bowed his gratitude for the women's attention. "I won't keep you any longer. I hope that as you work you'll meditate on what I have said." The Singers jumped to a start and the hand sewers returned to the conversations they had left unfinished. Mr. Keating had offered nearly the same sentiments the week before.

Many of the women felt as he did. Whether out of choice or circumstance these women worked to help their husbands support large families. Often these women had to work. Many more worked simply to enjoy freedom and leisure and worked only for that purpose. These women could quit at any time and rely instead on the efforts of their fathers or brothers. Like Charlotte's sisters these women could also quit to seriously pursue marriage and raise children.

Whether they did or did not take Mr. Keating's words to heart these single and free young women felt the weight of societies eyes upon them. They represented a generation of young women of whose commitment to carrying on the values and traditions of the past was in question.

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Charlotte refused to write too many letters back home. For some reason she wanted to keep her experiences to herself. Her father never responded and her mother only passed along well meant but fruitless offers from the interested young men of Perry. Only a sense of familial duty put the pen in her hand. She sat with her feet on the windowsill, the pad of paper in her lap, her mind wandering. The street below her window was relatively quiet owing to a recent storm that had forced everyone to shelter. If it were not for the quiet she never would have heard him struggling. The simple act of walking was made difficult by his condition.

After watching the man from the window then going into the street to see if he needed any help Charlotte was surprised to find that the he was not elderly, as she had first assumed, he was young, her own age, but severely crippled. One eye was missing and the whole right side of his face was mutilated. He leaned his

weight on a crutch as one of his legs was injured.

"Crushed," he informed Charlotte after receiving a rather shocked look, "in a steam press. My face," he spoke with considerable difficulty. "burned." Charlotte could not respond.

"I was a good worker. Now I have nothing. I can no longer work."

"The company you worked for, aren't they helping you?" Charlotte asked.

"No. They say it was my own fault."

"Your family?"

"I do not wish to burden them any longer. We have no money. I left."

Charlotte looked him over. He wore a pair of filthy trousers full of rips and holes. His shirt and jacket were no better than rags. His shoes had been mended, perhaps several times, but were again pulling apart.

"Wait here," said Charlotte helping him sit on the steps that led into her building. He politely obliged her as he desired a bit of rest anyway. Charlotte went inside, up to her room and fetched a small money purse. She had three dollars and seventy five cents. This she had saved for three weeks from what was left of her pay after her living expenses. Back on the steps she helped the man to his feet and walked with him to the gentlemen's store at the end of the block. He knew what Charlotte was doing and began to protest out of pride but stopped at his first breath. The struggle to subdue his ego to his needs was apparent on his face.

"These clothes are no good. Even in summer it gets cold at night. What if you caught pneumonia?"

The man forced himself to smile. "When I worked I provided for many" he looked at Charlotte, "now, strangers must provide for me."

The pair stopped in front of the door to the gentlemen's clothing store.

"I work too. We are laborers together and so I know how it goes." She helped the man through the doorway. "Besides, this is only a loan. I know you'll pay me back." The man did not respond but instead silently thanked her for the pride she had saved him. Once inside a seamstress greeted them. She did not say a word but instead quickly moved to take his measurements so he might sit down.

Together Charlotte and the seamstress found several pairs of pants for the man, many more shirts, socks, undergarments, a pair of sturdy shoes and even a woolen jacket in the back. Though the cost was greater than the money Charlotte

had the seamstress did not ask for more.

"I've seen him walking this street before," whispered the seamstress. "He has tried to get a job selling newspapers but no one will let him do that because they fear none will buy from a man so horribly scarred." She handed Charlotte the bundle of clothes. "You are a saint to bring him here. I have wanted to help him many times but, to be honest, I was afraid of him. I've never seen a man...", she did not finish her observation out an inability to find the words.

Charlotte looked at him. He watched the people outside walking in front of the window. "I've bargained us a good deal." Charlotte said, catching his attention. When the man saw the amount of clothes he was being given he immediately protested. He knew their value. He began to search through his pockets looking for any money he might of forgotten he possessed.

"It's already been paid for, Sir." The seamstress interrupted.

The man seemed crestfallen. "This is too much. A months wages..."

"Nonsense." Said the seamstress. "Summer is upon us and these pants are made of too heavy a material to be sold. You've done me a favor by taking them. I only hope you don't find them too uncomfortable."

"Why don't you try them on. Here, and a shirt too." The man went into the changing room and when he came out a time later he seemed in much better spirits.

"The cloth is a bit heavy," he agreed, "but I'll make due." He admired himself in the mirror. "It is a rather nice fit, isn't it?" The ladies agreed. "Perhaps with a proper suit like this I can find work again." He adjusted the collar and nodded to his reflection. "Well, no time to waste. With the travel season coming on I'm sure the hotels will need help. I'm a rather good cook. I don't mind doing dishes, either, though I think it would be a waste of my talents." Charlotte helped the man out of the door and bid him farewell. His mood grew serious and he found he could not form the words to thank her.

"You remember my building?" She asked. The man nodded. "When you find a job make sure to come by and tell me where you are cooking at. I'll take a free meal as payment." He nodded and tried to the best of his ability to bow.

"I will do just that. You shall not be disappointed." After Charlotte had helped him through the door and the two were beginning to part ways he extended his hand to her. "I am in debt to you," he stated simply and shook her

hand.