

Return of the Lady

by Claire Howe

More than a matter of adornment, the "return of the lady" is a world-wide politico-economic movement says "Claire-Howe," the joint signature of Ruth Howe and Claire Sifton. Miss Howe was a member of the staff of the "New York World." Miss Sifton is author of "Midnight 1933."

THE passing of stock exchange prosperity, mass interest in sex abnormality and other flamboyant features of that curious era which ended in 1931 brought also what appears to be the final paralysis of the American feminist movement. It had been setting in for years. In fact, when women began to vote they started to lose their fight for equality. The generation which inherited the right to go to the ballot box thought emancipation meant gin and companionate marriage.

As the Depression gathered force, women, with their unlimited capacity for adaptability, abandoned the fight for health girdles, equal pay, endowment of expectant mothers, cropped hair, mannish hats, sensible shoes and all the other battle-cries of the feminist movement. Egged on by Paris dressmakers and the insistence of textile manufacturers for larger turnovers, they escaped to the supposedly romantic age when women posed on pedestals. Skirts that sweep unsanitary floors, cartwheel hats, pinched waistlines and teetering heels mark the return of "the lady." Not a feminist voice is raised in protest.

This reaction is more than a matter of adornment. In the so-called progressive countries like the United States, Great Britain and Scandinavia, where woman's independence has meant more than the right to appear as unattractive as possible, there are many signs that the Hitler program of bundling all women back into their kitchens has appealed as a solution to the unemployment problem. The frontal attack has been against the married woman. National and local authorities have pursued a steady policy of ousting her from teaching and civil positions. Large industrial and business organizations have followed suit.

Aside from the formal protests of such organizations as the National Woman's Party and the National League of Women Voters, American women have made little or no attempt to defend their right to work regardless of their marital status. Individually some have met the problem by using a little ingenuity.



American Women During the Great Depression



Forced to choose between the marriage license and a job, many young women have managed without the license and are living in sin and secrecy with their life's partners and a double income. To accuse the United States Government of forcing "the flower of American womanhood" to live in love nests in order to hold their jobs, is, of course, not our province. But it is a matter of note that one of the largest and most conservative institutions in this country, one whose moral attitudinizing is equal only to the political corruption of the city in which it thrives, has driven a great many of its "unmarried" women employees to the uneasiness of a double life in order to safeguard their incomes. In another instance, that of a Texas railroad, the married women job-holders hurled divorce papers at the company board which had instituted a ban against them. But the women were fired anyway. In still another instance, the husbands gallantly did the resigning. When the Federal Economy Act became effective, compelling the resignation of either husband or wife where both were employed by the government, a number of men in the navy yards cheerfully laid down their tools and allowed their better-paid wives to carry on.

The drive against the married woman wage-earner is an undeniable "trend." Furthermore, it has the support of single women and the non-earning housewife. In Czechoslovakia recently, it was reported, Catholic women organized to petition the government to fire all married women in civil employment. Little do these women reckon that their immediate self-interest may obtain for them a sour victory.

Under democracy this "trend" against women has manifested itself so far in drives against married women. Under Fascism, Hitler and Mussolini have demanded that women's activities shall be restricted to the intensified breeding of male children. They are deprived of suffrage, presumably to make sure that they keep their minds on their designated function. Intensified housework has been officially named as woman's second job. Hitler recently decreed that the 600,000 girls now graduating from schools and colleges shall serve a term of not less than one year as maids in homes of the Fatherland.

Incidentally, what will be done with all the females, the "rice-eaters," whom nature will unfailingly supply under such a breeding program, Hitler notwithstanding, is not indicated. If times continue to be bad, the Fascists will have to bind their feet and sell them, unless some less wasteful way out can be found, such as conscripting them for war, or to work in government rug factories in exchange for food allowances. But that will again be



taking away jobs from men.

Mussolini, of course, started the back to the kitchen and cradle movement and his country-women are obediently peopling their small, infertile land with the abandon of settlers in a tractless wilderness. Mussolini also fixes the length of their dresses and makes them wear sleeves. On the whole they seem to like that. Perhaps that is a trend, too.

At any rate it appears that about all women can logically expect out of Fascism is an extra ration of butter fats during the gestation period. And Fascism is, apparently, one of the possible ends to the present economic chaos. Would-be dictators with shirted troops are cropping up everywhere and many men *and women* think they have some splendid ideas.

Whether the voluntary return to a status of chattel slavery, such as has taken place among the women of Central and Southern Europe, could happen in the United States, even under a Fascist dictatorship, is a question. The average American woman looks and acts as independently as almost any conception of the Woman of the Future. She dresses to please herself. She knows how to buy economically and intelligently. She travels alone in subways, ships and railways. She has made a place for herself in offices and factories. She drives her own car, gives interviews to newspapers from airplane cockpits, appears as counsel before the Supreme Court, or manages her own string of horses. Certainly, women did not do these things back in '88. It is conceivable that even in Russia, where sex inferiority is neither legal nor economic, there is more wife-beating than in the land of the New Deal.

As a record of fact, in this and most Western countries woman has acquired the right to hold office; to control her own property; to share equally in the guardianship of her children. This is so taken for granted by the present generation of women that they cannot conceive of a time when the law required that personal fortunes, real estate, even pay cheques, had to be handed over to father or husband to do with as he thought fit.

And, despite its tarnished glory, women did win the vote. Unfortunately, this privilege, achieved at so much cost, has not proved the "*Open, Sesame*" to every other equal right women expected. However, the vote established one thing: when it came to the ballot box, women were after all like men. None of the hopes and fears in regard to giving them suffrage has been realized. Even the argument that they would vote for the best-looking candidate has not been borne out. Congressmen, members of parliament and aldermen remain as phenomenally unattractive as ever. As to the moral leaven which idealists hoped women would bring to democracy, it has signally failed to rise.

In public office women have displayed the same disposition towards political ineptitude and corruption as men. The malfeasances of a Florence E. Knapp, the unprofessional opportunism of a Mabel Walker Willebrandt, are balanced by the practical idealism of a Frances Perkins and the sincere acceptance of co-responsibility on the part of the President's wife. Women are just like men. For every Ma Ferguson there is a Pa Ferguson. Women in office have, on the whole, displayed an astuteness in playing the political game which suggests that the feminine political brain can equal the male and must, therefore, be biologically of the same strength.

But the electorates are still somewhat in doubt. The

American Women During the Great Depression

increase of women in public bodies has been slow in ratio to their total numbers. But progress is discernible. In addition to the 8,000 postmistresses steaming open mail in communities of less than 5,000 population, there are almost 11,000 women now on the Federal payrolls. They are, in fact, increasing their numbers in minor political offices more rapidly than men are.

The same facts are true for England. Housewives, after their domestic stint, sit on county and city council meetings to see that the municipal trolleys and other services are properly run. Although women are still barred from service as jurors in many places, there are a few women judges. And public opinion is beginning to admit that women are useful around children's courts and in handling wayward minors. Given time, in the civil and political field, there is a fair chance that women may break even—perhaps by the time that legislators have ceased to have any significance and are looked upon as amusing vestiges of the colorful past.

Many women have won success as doctors and lawyers. An increasing number of learned societies are admitting them to membership. Selma Lagerlöf captured a Nobel Prize for literature and Willa Cather is mentioned for it as often as H. G. Wells. Jane Addams got half of a peace prize once.

Women often make the front pages on news items unconnected with divorce proceedings or losing their jewelry in taxicabs. A woman flew the Atlantic solo; another swam the English Channel. Some explore the Congo; others the Amazon jungle. In fact they do almost everything except go on a Byrd expedition. Although these stunts can be counted up definitely on the credit side of emancipation, most of them have been done by women to prove they could do them as women and not necessarily as people.

Then, of course, women smoke and drink and ride on top of busses like men. News reels show them rushing about without veils in Turkey and drilling in middy suits in Japan. They have proved that to do this they need not be wall-eyed or a member of the third sex.

There is a much publicized fraction not listed as "gainfully employed" who have worked the business of emancipation as a racket with the help of Reno and the alimony laws. Another three or four per cent are sitting pretty, with the American husband and father just about black-jacked by the advertising trade into giving mother everything except the shirt on his back. But these are the lilies of the field, and when Count Keyserling comes over and sees them sitting about in Park Avenue drawing rooms and hotel lobbies, he says that we have a matriarchy here. Male writers of light verse and prose find it profitable to complain whimsically about the war between men and women. Statistically, however, this group does not even show on the charts.

The Census of 1930 showed that 10,752,116 women, or about one fifth of the female population, were working, compared with three fourths of the male. In other words, the great majority of women today are still in their homes. According to the Women's Bureau of the United States



Department of Labor, this is only a ten per cent increase in the number of women, sixteen years or older, who work, since the Census of 1870. This is not much to brag about in sixty years!

The percentage of women who work in England, where they have more than held their own as novelists,

American Women During the Great Depression

who work in England, where they have more than held their own as novelists, League of Nations' Delegates, and hockey coaches, indicates that women are losing ground in other occupations. The International Labor Bureau survey, conducted by Dr. Marguerite Thibert, reports that the percentage of females employed in England in 1891 was 26.9 per cent. By 1911 it had fallen to 25.9; by 1921 to 25.5. In Scotland, the increase has been only 0.2 per cent in thirty years. The percentages in these two countries are probably explained by the cutting down of female child labor.

In France, 39 per cent of the female population was at work in 1906. In 1926, this figure had fallen to 36.6 per cent. Even so, apparently a larger number of women are out earning wages in factories and offices, fields and vineyards, in France than in America or Great Britain. This is a startling refutation of the popular notion that French women spurn jobs outside their homes.

In Austria, Belgium, Denmark and, of course, Italy, the number of women workers during the last half century of feminine progress has also fallen. Before Hitler, Germany showed the greatest increase of all countries—in 1882, only 24 per cent of the women were employed; in 1926, 36.6 per cent—but, of course, all that is over now.

The appearance of the woman worker has changed greatly in the past fifty years. The heavily petticoated seamstresses and servants of the '80's are overalled women at modern machine-driven laundries and factories today. That very change implies a gain in freedom and, therefore, sex equality. But the impetus which brought about this change has come more from the extension of the industrial system than from emancipation.

Women outside of the top Four Hundred have always worked. The question of whether they should, or should not, never arose, even theoretically, until they entered factories and began to undercut men's wages. They provided agricultural labor throughout the centuries. Less than a hundred years ago, they worked in mines in England alongside their children, doing the lowest type of unskilled manual labor. Sometimes they were harnessed to trucks, thrifty mine-owners finding that they could be got for less money than it took to feed a good mule and keep it healthy. But when men were eased out of jobs, to be replaced by women at lower wages, moral scruples developed about taking women out of their homes. For the sake of the free labor market, reformers advocated the theory of woman's biological inferiority. The arguments referred especially to child-bearing, a threat to the race.

In America, biological inferiority did not prevent the pioneer woman from helping to clear forests and break new land. She was slow entering the factory because of the plentiful supply of cheap immigrant labor. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century, the first census figures showed that 18 per cent of the female population of the United States was working outside the home. This revelation, coupled with the strident suffrage movement, frightened the bishops and other guardians of public morals. Every Sunday the burial service was read over the American Family.

But, figuratively speaking, the bishops were crying in the wilderness. The American Family had long before become incorporated in the factory system, its clothes, food, laundry and physical ailments, an important mainstay of the industrial structure. Technological unemployment struck the woman in the home first of all, rendering uneconomic hand-sewing, home-baking and canning, even laundering. For the middle-class woman, the advertising trade invented new symbols of social inferiority—the apron,

American Women During the Great Depression

the dust mop and the washing line. The leisured woman, therefore, turned to bridge. The others went into offices and factories in order to wear silk underwear and encarnadine their fingernails.

Today, here and there, a woman may be found driving a taxi or managing a mine. But, except for the new occupations such as telephone operator and stenographer, most work done by women is still in the domestic tradition. According to a bulletin on Occupational Progress, issued by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor, almost one third of the female population of more than ten years of age, or 29.16 per cent, is engaged in domestic and personal service. This means as servants and waitresses in homes, hotels and restaurants. Of the 17.5 per cent in manufacturing, half are in textiles, the remainder in tobacco, shoe, candy and baking industries. Clerical and stenographic jobs are filled by 18.5 per cent; 9 per cent are in stores; 8.5 per cent in agriculture and 2.6 per cent work as telephone operators. Teaching and nursing, including a fraction in the so-called learned professions, employ the remaining 14.2 per cent.

To a great extent, these are occupations and lines of work in which women do not compete with men, because of their traditionally feminine character and low pay. Hence, the charge of usurpation can scarcely be sustained.

Furthermore, from the Women's Bureau statistics, it appears that, with a few exceptions, women tend to increase in numbers as workers in unskilled, lower paid occupations and to decrease in the skilled, tightly unionized trades and the professions. While they are failing in numbers as accountants, they are increasing rapidly as bookkeepers and cashiers. They have declined considerably as skilled tailors and cutters, but have increased as operatives in the clothing trade.

When it is recalled that practically the whole fight for equal opportunity was epitomized in the struggle of women to gain entrance to the medical profession, it is depressing to note that the number of women physicians has declined from 5.9 per cent in 1910 to 5.2 per cent in 1930, and this despite increased facilities for admitting women to medical schools.

In 1928, when the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, a hospital founded by the first woman doctor, Elizabeth Blackwell, to provide women with the opportunity to acquire surgical and clinical practice, narrowly escaped closing, it was revealed that of the 1,667 attending physicians and surgeons in the twenty-six largest New York hospitals only twenty were women. There were 700 graduate women physicians at that time, compared to 15,000 men. In other words only 3 per cent of the women doctors had managed to secure appointments as compared with 11 per cent of the men. In the obstetrical and gynecological field, where it might be expected that the woman specialist would gain a substantial footing, only four had been able to obtain hospital appointments.

Commenting on the plight of the woman surgeon, Dr. Eleanor Van Alstyne, then president of the New York Women's Medical Association, said: "Denied hospital practice, except in a few institutions staffed by women such as the Infirmary, she is condemned to practice minor surgery for the rest of her life. And she is handicapped in private practice because she cannot take her patients to general hospitals, but has to rely on private sanatoria where only the wealthy patient can afford to go."

In other professions women have run upon stony thoroughfares. In 1930 there were only 379 women architects, which is not surprising when it is considered that experience is absolutely necessary and impossible to obtain. Something of the same *impasse* occurs in accountancy. Sophonisba Breckenridge, in her book, "*Women in the*

American Women During the Great Depression

Twentieth Century," points out that in 1920 there were only seven women members of the American Institute of Accountants out of a total membership of 1,500. Owing to the fact that considerable prejudice exists against women in this occupation, it is not likely that they have increased their numbers since.

Outstanding exceptions to the retrogressive trend are the increasing number of women college presidents and professors. As authors, editors and reporters women are rapidly usurping men. In 1910 there were only 6,239 women reporters; in 1930, there were 17,371. Women are still in the majority as school teachers, but the statistics indicate that they are beginning to lose some of their advantage. In the decade, 1920 to 1930, men teachers registered a gain of 62.6 per cent as compared with 34.4 per cent for women teachers. This would indicate that the future holds little opportunity for women in this traditionally woman's profession. The decline noted in the case of women music teachers is much sharper.

"As artists, sculptors and teachers of art," the Women's Bureau report states, "men appear to be forging to the front at the expense of women, but the change is not so great as among musicians and teachers of music."

As compositors, linotype operators and typesetters—highly organized, well-paid crafts—women are rapidly losing ground. Whereas in 1910 there was one woman to every eight men in this trade, there are now 17 men to each woman. In 1912, there were 12,500 women members of the Machinists' Union; in 1931, none at all. The Moulders' Union bars women from membership.

Crumbs of comfort, especially on the cash side, may be derived from the fact that women are increasing rapidly as real estate agents and "beauticians." Beauty is still a woman's job, it seems, in all territory west of Fifth Avenue. They are increasing in the advertising trade, as domestic servants, in certain lines of industry where light machinery is used and, of course, as stenographers and telephone operators. They have decreased in the manufacturing and mechanical trades, but so, to a less degree, have men, machinery having replaced both.

But women's wages lag far behind those of men. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, for the years from 1922 to 1932, women's average earnings in nine important woman-employing industries were only from 45 to 84 per cent as much as men's. In over three fourths of the cases women's earnings were less than 70 per cent of men's.

In New York, women's wages in manufacturing were 54 per cent of men's in 1932; in Illinois they were 58 per cent. Although the difference between men's and women's wages is largely due to women's work, being unskilled, even when they work at the same jobs, women as a rule receive less pay than men.

The principle of wage discrimination in regard to sex recently received official sanction in the codes of the NRA. Of 194 codes approved up to the end of December, forty-four contained clauses fixing lower wage rates for women than men. Six of these were blanket rules, the remaining thirty-eight contained qualifying clauses to the effect that the lower rate shall not apply to women doing the same work as men. But, as the Women's Bureau points out, the discriminating rates are already fixed as part of the law of the codes, and past experience, in particular that of the War Labor Board, has shown that such qualifications are of "little value in securing wage rates for women equal to those of men doing the same work."

Again, on the issues of unemployment among women and decline of wages, this same authority has nothing hopeful to add. The fragmentary data which the Bureau has been able to collect is published with the comment that unemployment not only appears more serious for

American Women During the Great Depression

women than men but "undoubtedly is of a permanent character."

Figures for the manufacturing industry in New York State, covering the period from June, 1931, to June, 1932, showed a decline of 19.2 per cent for women and 16 per cent for men. In Illinois, for all industries for the same period, women's wages declined 17.2 per cent; men's 16.9 per cent. This trend is also reflected in the cotton states and in New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

The NRA sins of the present Administration in respect to women, however, pale before the infamous Section 213 of the Federal Economy Act, initiated by Hoover and continued, dismissals and all, by the liberal Roosevelt Administration. The law forbids the employment of both husband and wife in the Civil Service, an interdict carried out mostly against wives. Section 213—sanctioned by a popular administration with a First lady of outstandingly emancipated habits both of utterance and of locomotion and the First Woman in the Cabinet—has given impetus in the United States to a movement, well-advanced in other countries, which must if it continues its logical progress put women back in the Middle Ages.

State legislatures have followed the example of the Federal government. Last year bills along the same line were introduced into legislatures of Illinois, Pennsylvania and Washington, the last, ironically enough, by a woman. New York in 1933 had a bill to prevent both husband and wife working in the same school system.

In a survey of 1,500 cities made by the National Education Association in 1930 and '31, about 77 per cent of the cities, it was indicated, do not employ new teachers who are married. In more than one half of these cities, as soon as a woman teacher marries she is forced to resign.

Railroads have dismissed married women in large numbers. One road is said to have discharged 1,500 and replaced them with 500 men. A Texas railroad announced that it would fire all married women whose husbands were making \$50 a month and over. The Spokane-Portland and Seattle Railway, in reply to a circular from the National Federation of Professional and Business Women's Clubs, stated last year that "pursuant to an agreement entered into with the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks, married women employees whose husbands are able to support them are relieved from service, and that no married woman had been employed since the agreement was entered into."

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, according to the New York branch of the National Woman's Party, has dismissed practically all its married women employees. Although seventeen other railroads circularized by the Federation announced that they would not discriminate against married women employees, some officials qualified the statement by adding that in certain cases where the woman did not need her salary she was dismissed. The Northern Pacific Railway Company dismissed all married women employees on October 1, 1931. The New England Telephone and Telegraph Company has also pursued this policy.

Because of the obviousness of its appeal during the Depression when jobs are scarce, this policy of discrimination against the married woman has been easy to carry out. It is not unreasonable to suppose, therefore, that if unemployment continues—and even the most irresponsible optimist admits that machinery must under any circumstances continue to put people out of jobs—it will in the end result in a complete ban against all women who work for wages outside the home.

In the face of the ocean of unemployment (it used to be called a pool) it has been impossible to argue that everybody has the right to work, man or woman. Women's leaders have given up trying. They fall back, instead, on surveys showing that women work only because they have

American Women During the Great Depression

to, not because they want to. The Women's Bureau, that most efficient organization, headed by Mary Anderson, has issued eight bulletins on such surveys in different parts of the country. Their conclusions are that women work "to keep the home and family together because of the husband's inadequate wage, his unemployment, his illness, or incapacity; to raise the family's standard of living to a health and decency basis; to give the children a better education; to buy a home, or household equipment; to pay off doctor's bills; to support elderly parents or other relations; to save for a rainy day."

Similarly, this thesis that women work because they have to, rather than because they want to be independent, is a conclusion derived from a questionnaire recently sent out by the National Federation of Professional and Business Women's Clubs to 5,000 of its members. This showed that two thirds of them had dependents, more than one fourth had some person entirely dependent on them; an additional fifth shared responsibility for the support of two or more persons. It is significant that an organization of this kind, feminist in tradition and character, should take this defensive attitude.

Again, the National Woman's Party, most feminist of them all, which has for years fought to obtain repeal of protective laws for women—such laws as the minimum wage for women and those forbidding nightwork—on the grounds that such protection was discriminatory, has now abandoned this activity to concentrate on the passage of the so-called equal rights Amendment, which, they say, will automatically do away with all sex inequalities, whether favorable or otherwise. That such an amendment would be unenforceable goes without saying. The Government will not soon again, after the disastrous failure of the Eighteenth Amendment, attempt to put into the field the huge army of enforcement officers that would be required to check up on every factory, restaurant, store and hotel, to see that men and women employed are paid the same low wage for the same work.