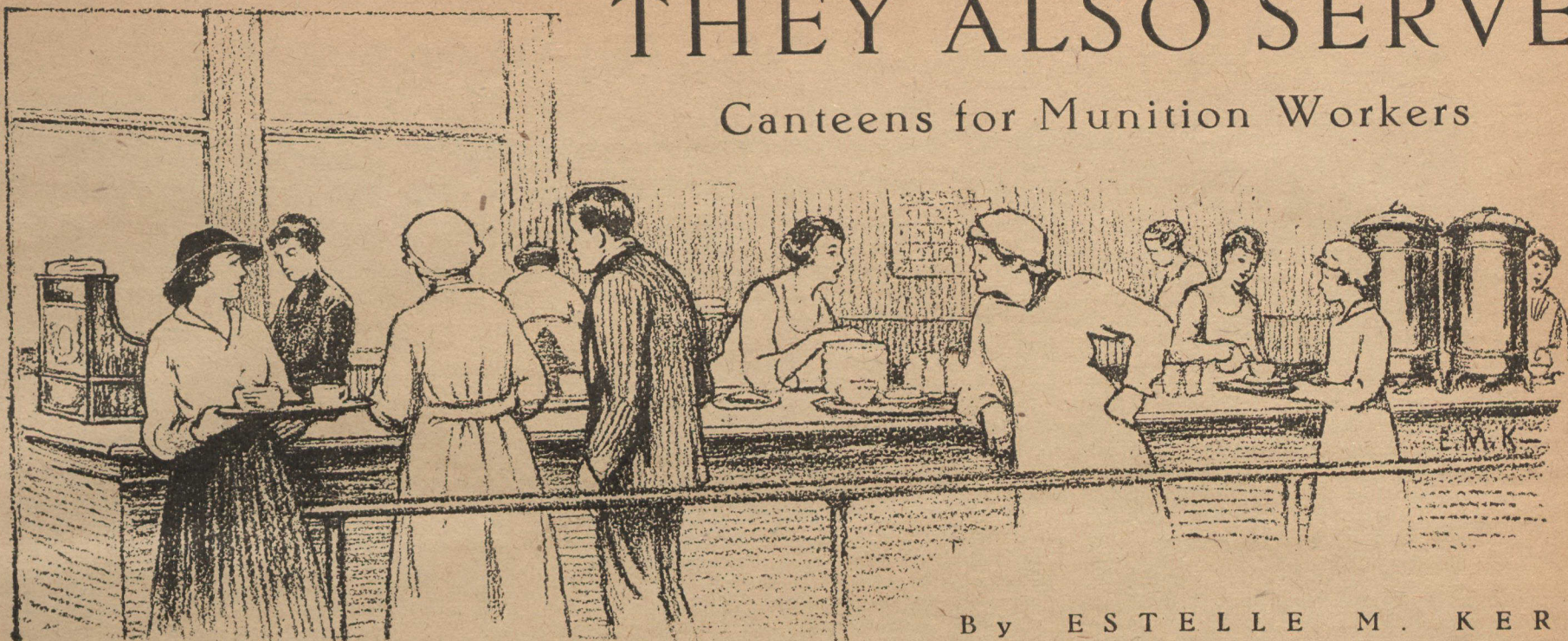


THEY ALSO SERVE

Canteens for Munition Workers



By ESTELLE M. KERR

TWELVE hundred women munition workers were entertained on New Year's eve at a supper and dance at Exhibition Park, Toronto, and this by no means represents the total number employed in Toronto factories, for many preferred to spend the last night of the old year with their friends and families. Neither were the members of the night shift present, for all energy must be concentrated on fulfilling the British contracts. An order for munitions to the value of \$60,000,000 has recently been received, and the shortage in delivery has become so serious that munition workers were also asked to forego their New Year's holiday and their Saturday half-holidays for a time.

Unless you are a regular worker, or trying to become one, the only way to see the inside of a munition plant is to work in one of the canteens which the Young Women's Christian Association, at the request of the Imperial Munitions Board, have established in some of our Canadian factories. To gain admittance you must secure the card of a regular canteen worker or the keen-eyed gatekeeper may suspect you of carrying a bomb in your shopping-bag; then you are allowed to enter a large room lined with shrapnel cases, where a freight elevator takes you to a large, light flat, divided into offices, cloak rooms, wash-room and lunch-room.

IT was noon when we entered and the workers were coming and going, punching the time-clock to register their hour of arrival. Some of the members of the afternoon shift were already there, as they wished to run no risk of being late and so lose their bonus of \$3.00 a week for punctuality. One of the offices was occupied by the Lady Superintendent, and in another, her assistants—stenographer, time-keeper, telephone operator—transacted the business of the department. Beyond the offices is a long, airy room, fitted with tables and wicker chairs, where about twenty girls in their street costumes were seated, some with a casual air as if they had just arrived, others comfortably ensconced with reading or knitting. These were all women who had their names enrolled on the waiting-list and now sat here, day after day, paid at the rate of ten cents an hour, until a vacancy should occur. Beyond the waiting-room is an equally spacious lunch-room, fitted with a number of long tables. At one side is a counter and the workers, kept in line by an iron railing, help themselves to a tray and pass down the line. One of the lady assistants serves tea and coffee, the next presides over the soup and baked beans, a third dispenses bread and butter, sandwiches and milk, a fourth cakes and pies, and the fifth, with by far the most arduous task, has charge of the cash register, checking the contents of the tray and making change.

"It wouldn't be nearly so difficult," she confided to me, "if they all paid cash, but I have to keep accounts as well. The people in the head office, the trained nurse, the lady superintendent and several others prefer to charge things, and as they visit the canteens two or three times a day, and the purchases always run into a number of odd cents, it is a nuisance, when a string of other people are passing by at the same time. Then I am supposed to keep

a record of the number served each day, and as they often come back to make an extra purchase of chiclets or chocolate, that complicates matters."

ALL the help in the canteen—with the exception of the dish-washer—is voluntary. There are four shifts a day, three of five hours' duration, while the night shift is nine hours. One lady is responsible for each shift, and must see that her workers—six for each day-shift and four at night—are on duty. It is easy to get workers for the day time; the night is not so popular, and some of the workers complain that they work ten hours without remuneration, while the factory girls are well paid for their six. At night the employees are less numerous, and it is only around 1 a.m., when the shifts are changing, that there is a rush. After that is over the workers may rest on stretchers provided for them, and drawing a blanket over them, sleep if they can until it is necessary to prepare for the early breakfast rush.

The troublesome task of purchasing supplies falls on one woman, and she is on hand nearly every day, checking off purchases, noting supplies on hand, guarding against waste. The appetite of the munition-worker is capricious. Sometimes as many as seven hundred pass before the counter during the day, sometimes the number is infinitely smaller. At times they develop a passion for apple pie and a rush order is sent to the confectioners for more. The next day an ample supply is provided and this day the preference is for canned peaches and cake. "One of those little cakes with cocoanut on it and a dab of red jelly on top, please. Don't tell me you haven't any to-day!"

"Do you mean to say the pork and beans is off! No, I don't want any cold meat. I'll take some soup, if you're sure it's hot. I've heard the fame of your pork and beans way over at the other factory. Wish you had some sandwiches—it's for taking across. Of course we aren't supposed to eat, but you do get hungry working from one to seven and then it's nearly eight before you're home."

"Tea, please, and I don't care how strong it is—it can't be strong enough for me!"

VERY becoming are the blue caps and aprons, though the latter are often exceedingly dirty.

In the uniformity of dress—for the aprons and caps are purchased by the workers at the factory—it is more than ever apparent that clothes do not make the lady, and if the women who had worked hard all their lives sometimes looked askance when a merry peal of laughter came from the table at which a group of "the swells" were sitting, an on-looker, comparing types, was forced to the conclusion that even in manual labour, education and breeding should count for something. A complaint has been made that the so-called "society girls" are given the preference, but as a business concern, the preference is naturally for the best worker. The woman of education thinks more quickly and soon adapts herself to fill positions of responsibility, and in recruiting munition workers no effort is made to reach those who are already doing useful work as domestic servants, stenographers and clerks, but rather the women of leisure who will not suffer at

the end of the war, when the stoppage of munition factories throws thousands of workers out of employment.

One table was reserved for men—or at any rate men filled it during the noon hour. Some of them had passed the age limit, some had not reached it, but there were others who looked particularly strong and healthy.

"I draw the line at serving slackers," said a pretty little amateur waitress, turning her back to the counter as a handsome young giant paused before the pies she was cutting.

"Oh, give him the benefit of the doubt," whispered her companion, "perhaps he has flat feet."

"Possibly he is a skilled mechanic," said another. "We girls are all right for making parts of things, but when the machinery gets out of order we become mere spectators!"

SOMETIMES the blue-capped girls recognized friends in the canteen assistants and stopped to talk when the noon rush was over. They often had a new record output of shells or fuses to quote, for each in her particular department seemed anxious to beat the established record.

Occasionally they grumble a bit, in a good-natured way:

"Oh, we are so sick of your canned soups and beans. I do wish we could have a canteen with good home cooking," complained one.

"Then why don't you eat at home?"

"The hours are so inconvenient. I leave at noon after a late breakfast. I can't possibly have lunch before I go, but if I don't take something in the canteen I'm starving at seven. The girls who start after us can dine at home, but they are ready to eat at 1 a.m. The next shift could get home in time for breakfast, but they usually want a cup of coffee. It's very ungrateful to complain, for I don't know what we'd do without you. Still, don't you think if there was a proper kitchen and a real cook you might do better? Perhaps in the new all-women's building there will be one. Anyone who has kept house knows how extravagant it is to live on tinned goods, ready cooked meat, cakes and pies."

"We don't try to make money, but we do even now, though we charge little more than cost price. Of course the money is needed for the welfare work in smaller places that have to be fitted with lodging houses and other conveniences for women workers."

"But the greatest part of the profit goes to the canning factories, whose headquarters are in the U. S. A. We are able to pay for good food. There is hardly a girl here who isn't earning \$15 a week. We don't want charity."

Things are in an experimental stage as yet, but now that the canteen has proved to be not only a boon to the worker, but a financial success, it will gradually be put on a commercial basis and, as time goes on, we shall find that the women who began life in a munition factory by acting as waitresses for one day, may become regular workers. There is no woman without some friend or relative at the front, and rich or poor, paid or unpaid, there is a common bond of sympathy that draws all war-workers together.