

Student Handout 2-“Counter Trials: The Shop-Girl Speaks”

[The following article was part of a series of interviews with working women which ran in the Sunday Tribune from December 29, 1889 to May 25, 1890.]

“Ah-h! I feel as if my feet had gone to Heaven!” said the sales-girl, as she exhibited a number three foot in a number five slipper. “I get solid comfort out of these old slippers when I come home in the evening with my feet hurting so I can hardly stand. Shoes too tight? Not a bit of it! My shoes are always too large for me, but standing all day swells my feet and makes them painful.

“The first day I went into the store I thought I’d die before 6 o’clock, but one can get used to anything except being scolded—that I never can get used to, no matter how long I may stay in the store. Why am I so naughty as to need scolding? It aint me that’s naughty, it’s the customers. I do get so mad sometimes that I could jump over the counter and beat ‘em! They aint got no notion of buying when they come in, but all the same they want to see this, that and the other thing, and so they make me take down box after box, and then they stand there, worrying the life out of me, asking no end of questions, and crowding out other folks who might buy if they could only get a chance; and when all’s said and done they walk away without my making a sale, and then I get a scolding from one of the bosses. Which one? Well, most always it’s our buyer. I spoke back to him the other day! Says I, “It takes a smarter girl than me to make folks buy when they aint got no money to buy with.” Why, bless your heart! Sometimes women, wearing hats and wraps that I’d be ashamed to be seen in will come to my counter and make me show ‘em my highest priced laces. They aint the only kind, though, that only come to look. There’s them in sealskin sacques and \$50 bonnets who will spend hours in a store and go out without buying a penny’s worth. Them’s the sort that make me nervous when they come around because I get my awfulest scoldings on their account. I s’pose it’s fun for them to come and see what we’ve got, and then go on to see what they’ve got in other stores, but it aint no fun for the girls who are expected to make sales.

“Oh, me! If here aint a place on my sleeve that’s most worn through! I’ll have to get a new dress for the store. If I had my way about it I’d get one for Sunday and wear my blue cashmere in the store, but I’d have to get it dyed first, and I hate to have a dress dyed when there aint nothing the matter with it. Wear it as it is? Oh, dear, no! That wouldn’t be allowed. We are expected to dress either in black or in some grave color that don’t make no show. Black is what they like best, and that is why I have lived in this old thing so long. In common stores the young ladies may wear all the colors of the rainbow, but it’s different in a first-class establishment. At one time there was talk of our having to give up our bangs, but I guess they thought better of it.

“Are we expected to lie professionally? What do you mean by that? Oh, to “get off goods on customers.” Well, some of they young ladies will do it because it’s in ‘em and they can’t help it, but lies aint paid extra for, as in some stores where a girl gets a commission on her sales of out-of-style wraps and things. Employers Christian men? I don’t know as our bosses are extra Christian, but I heard one of ‘em say once that lying wasn’t business-like. You see our store has a reputation to keep up. Talk about sales-ladies saying what aint so, you ought to hear the customers! When I was in the cloak department last winter I was every day sending off goods C.O.D. that did nothing but come back to me again. The ladies, when they said they’d take them, had no more ideas of paying for them than I had.

“As for sass, let people say what they will, I’m sure there’s them that come to buy that’s sassier than any of them that sell. My, how sick and tired I used to get of trying sacque after sacque on a customer, and when I’d tell her it was a perfect fit having her ask me if I called wrinkles a fit! Of course a sacque will be full of wrinkles when a woman is twisting around in front of the mirror, trying to see her own back. On my sacred word of honor, I’ve tried thirty sacques on one customer, and then, after her taking up my time for two hours or more, and maybe preventing my getting my lunch till half past 3 in the afternoon, she’d go away saying that probably she’d come in again the next day, and then she hoped she would have a more

obliging young woman to wait on her. Just the other day I was stooping down behind the counter, putting away some lace, when, the first thing I knew, somebody poked me in the back with a great umbrella, and when I looked up the customer that done it began business by threatening to report me for inattention.

"I tell you, with all the work I have to do, and all I have to put up with, nobody ought to grudge me my \$10 a week. A fair salary, you say? Yes, I s'pose it is. I know it is twice as large as what some girls get in common stores, but then in common stores they employ common girls."

"Counter Trials: The Shop-Girl Speaks" *excerpted from: Crane, Stephen. Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York). Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 1999. (pp.250-253)*