

MISS BOND'S QUEER EXPERIENCE IN CERTAIN PRIVATE EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES—AND OTHERS

BY EDITH M. BOND.

URE, I can fix you out. Just had a call for a housekeeper from a man down on a ranch in Southern Oregon; easy work, \$5 a month, and a nice place to stay. Don't usually have much call for women's work, but I know this man and promised him I'd find him a woman."

I was standing in an employment agency on Second street North and the above remark was in answer to my timid request for work. It was not a very prepossessing place. I noted as the manager left me for a moment to attend to the wants of an insistent customer. The office was small, dark and untidy with several rough-looking men standing around, and a very pungent odor of vile tobacco permeated the atmosphere.

"You see," said the proprietor, turning to me, "it's this way. I sent him down a man and wife—at least she said she was his wife—couple of weeks ago. She was going to cook and he would work on the ranch. Woman skipped out last week and my friend is without anybody to do the house work. This time he says he wants just a single woman, and you seem to fill the bill pretty well. Truly wonderful insight, indeed, since I had not uttered a single word other than my first meek request as to whether he had work for a woman."

"He'll pay your fare down there if you don't want to pay it," he added as he took my measure with shifty but critical eyes.

"But I'm a stranger in the city," I volunteered (this glance took on a shade more interest). "And I haven't any references."

He brushed aside my reluctant admission with a lordly wave of the hand. "That never cuts any ice with us," he added reassuringly, and then as an afterthought, "Nobody pays much attention to 'em anyhow."

"What would you charge for getting me the place?" I asked.

"Two dollars," he said.

I affected dismay. "Oh, I couldn't afford to pay that much," I said quickly, assuming a pleading, poverty-stricken air.

The smooth voice took on a condescending note as he answered: "Well, maybe I could let you have it for a dollar and a half, seeing it's a friend of mine."

I still shook my head dejectedly. "I couldn't afford it," I said dejectedly as I started for the door.

"Wait a second," he called out. "Don't hurry off mad. Would you say 'yes' if I gave it to you for a dollar?"

He was leaning over a desk and I turned toward him in an attitude of wheedling persuasion. Then as I still hesitated he said softly:

"Remember the man's money wages in a job like that to a woman that's wise. The learning wink that accompanied this speech was unmistakable as he confirmed the unspoken suspicion which had been quickly gathering in my mind. But I affected not to see the significance of the leer and gazed meditatively at the grimy wall in front of me.

There was a moment of tense silence. Then, evidently perceiving he had made a mistake, he added in quite a different tone:

"Oh, well, if you don't want to take it, suit yourself. But take my word for it, it's a mighty good chance for the right sort of a girl—the truth of which remark I did not doubt in the least. But he had evidently come to the conclusion that I was not 'the right sort of a girl' for without another word he left me and turned his attention to a burly Swede logger who was demanding a 'job' at once.

Just what the agent's intentions were should I have accepted the offer is still a matter of conjecture in my mind, but the opinion I instinctively formed of the place has since been confirmed by careful inquiry at certain reliable protective agencies—all of which took occasion to warn me against the man and his methods.

A trifle nervous, but in no wise daunted by my unpleasant experience, I made my way to another place situated on lower Morrison street. A fat German with a rubicund countenance and offensively oily manners received me.

"Is this an employment agency?" I asked politely.

He smiled blandly. "Not now," he replied. "It used to be, but it ain't no more. Did you want a job?"

"Yes," I replied somewhat curtly. Then moved by the desire for effect, I added: "I'm a stranger in the city and I want work."

"So," he remarked effusively. "What kind of job did you want?"

He smiled and said: "Oh, we sometimes get jobs for friends," he added explanatorily in answer to my quick look of inquiry.

I made the usual answer: "Anything but general housework."

He got up from his seat and came close to me. "Come in here a minute," he said, pushing me in the direction of an open door leading into another room.

I allowed myself to be thus gently propelled, and was soon seated in a small private office adjoining the room I had first entered. My would-be benefactor then carefully locked the door and turning to me, said:

"And the city employment bureau?"

"Where's that?" I asked.

He explained its location and plan of work, all the while surveying me with a gaze that was becoming more and more offensively familiar.

"Where are you staying?" he said, ending his explanation.

"I haven't got a room yet," I said.

"I want work first, then—"

Interest deepened perceptibly as he interrupted soothingly: "I've got just what you want upstairs. My wife she runs the place, and you can get a nice, clean room for fifty cents. The regular price is seventy-five, but you can have it for fifty. Come right with me and I'll show you what a nice room it is."

"I'll look at the room later," I said hastily, a bit alarmed at the way affairs were progressing. "I want work first."

"Oh, don't you worry about that now. You must be tired from your trip, and what you need is a good rest," he murmured, with another smirk, reaching out and putting my hand affectionately as it rested on the table between us. "You'll be taken care of all right, and tomorrow'll be time enough to think about going to work. If you ain't got the money to spare for the room now, I can fix it so you won't have to pay in advance, and you can stay as long as you like, see? Don't

do much in the employment business now," answering the startled look in my eyes. "But we get lots of chances to place people in good jobs, and we wouldn't charge you anything—just do it for a favor. You come right on up and see the room, and rest yourself a while, and we'll find the job later," he added soothingly, supplementing his invitation with an attempt to take my arm.

"After awhile," I said, trying not to show the nervousness I felt soon must become painfully apparent. Then, spurring for time, I commented:

"This is certainly a lot of kindness to show to a perfect stranger."

But he seemed determined to show me that room whether or no. "We like to do favors for friends," he said, with another oily smile, "and it's a nice room, too—just above the office."

I allowed myself to be gently steered in this direction of the outer office, as though persuaded to take a look at the room. Once outside, my courage returned, and I decided that retreat would be the better part of valor. Not wishing to appear afraid, however, I said quietly:

"I think I'll go up to the city bureau first; then if I don't find anything there, I'll come back and take advantage of your kind offer. Much obliged. Good morning!"—and in a moment I was downstairs.

Outside in the welcome safety of the warm sunlight, terror gave place to indignation, but I confess I had gone fully three blocks before I found sufficient courage to relax my pace or glance backward in the direction whence I had come. Even now the image of that smirking countenance invades my memory with repulsion and makes me tingle with disgust and abhorrence.

These two unpleasant incidents, coming as they did in rapid succession, had a depressing effect upon my spirits, and it was with trepidation that I sought out the next place on my list. But here an agreeable surprise awaited me.

In charge of the office was a quiet little woman with deep innocent eyes and a sweet, sad mouth. She acknowledged that she was "new to the business," as her manner clearly proved. She listened to my tale, expressions of deep sympathy and interest chasing themselves across her mobile features.

"You have had no 'experience'?" she asked.

"Just a little bit of teaching in a country school," I admitted. At the magic word "teaching" her face brightened.

"It was once a teacher," she said, sweetly. "Wouldn't you like to come up to my room and stay all night, or until you can get something better?"

"Unexpected kindness embarrassed me, and for a minute I was nonplussed, hesitating to hurt her feelings by blunt refusal of her kind offer."

"Are you taking a big risk?" I asked. "You know nothing whatever of me, and yet you are willing to share your room with me?"

"She smiled in embarrassed pleasure. 'I don't think a teacher is ever very bad,' she replied. 'I've trusted them before, and I've never yet been deceived. Think it over if you like, and let me know later. Here's the address if you decide to come.'"

Then she went on to explain the positions available on her list, but I gave little heed to the explanation. I was mentally adjusting myself to this rather amazing state of affairs and speculating as to the feeling which prompted such unusual treatment.

This agency, I at last gathered, exacted a fee of 5 per cent of the first month's salary for the position secured, the same to be paid in advance by the applicant, and redeemed should the position be rejected. Upon close questioning, however, my informant admitted that these fees were seldom returned, the agency usually substituting another position instead, which it also rejected by the applicant put an end to the responsibility assumed by the employment bureau. I have every reason to believe that the establishment previously mentioned honestly inclines to

fair dealing, but so much can be said of very few of the other places I visited. The prospect of a good job is merely the bait by which unsophisticated persons are divorced from their cash, and the fee once paid, there is small hope of its ever being returned.

The kindness and sympathetic interest of my new-found friend gave me new hope, and I left the dingy office with a feeling that there was some Christian kindness in the world after all—the cherry God-speed of the little woman's farewell advice ringing in my ears with grateful sweetness for hours afterward.

Further up Morrison street I entered another employment office, only to find it half filled with a crowd of seeking jobless applicants. Some were talking glibly of previous experiences; others waited in sullen silence; some eyed me with varying shades of contempt or good natured pity, while others gave me no more than a fleeting glance, flung at me in the intervals when they paused to shift their chewing gum to the other side and give ease to the overworked submaxillaries.

I had a long time to wait before the astute female at the desk was ready to hear my tale of woe, and to pass the time I fell into conversation with a young girl next to me, in whose anxious countenance I sensed an experience.

My surmise proved correct, and after comparing notes on the relative merits of the various agencies, she told me of an interesting experience her brother had at a certain labor agency on Second street—the only opportunity I had to learn how men are sometimes taken in.

Three energetic fee-chasers, a girl and her brother came to Portland from Pendleton several weeks ago. She had found work as a domestic, had saved a little money and was then looking for a place as cook, at which she could make better wages.

"Better keep away from them places down toward Burnside," said the girl. "My brother only had about ten dollars when we got here. He went to an agency down there and was promised an all-Winter job clearing land if he would pay the agent two and a half. I was at work and then he came and told me he had a job for all Winter. I was awful glad."

"Within just about a week, Henry came around and told me he had been awfully swindled and robbed. He had to pay a dollar to get to the job. It was clear'n brush and stumps and land somewhere down the river. When he got there the boss gave him a dull axe and a grub and told him where to go to work. But the tools were so dull he couldn't do much with 'em, and at night he told me about it. The boss told him any man that knew how to cut a day's work with them tools, so Henry went to work with them again next day."

"Long about night the boss came around and told him to quit. He called Henry a lazy loafer, an' cursed him; then told him to clear out. When Henry asked for his money the boss told him he hadn't done enough to pay for his grub, and wouldn't give him a cent. He wouldn't sign his paper from the agency, either, so Henry could get his two and a half back."

"Henry had to come back here, and on the boat he came back in he found two other men who had been working for the same outfit, and they had both been fired after working a few days, and hadn't got a cent for their work."

"When Henry went to the agency down here and told 'em about it they only laughed at him, and when he got mad, the agent swore at him and told him to get out or he'd have him arrested. And now I have to give Henry twenty-five cents every day to live on."

"Sure, just five cents for doughnuts and coffee for breakfast, and ten cents for dinner, and supper."

At last my turn came and I was disposed of in short order. It was clearly a case of "pay your money down first and then we'll talk to you." The fee here was five per cent of the first month's salary, the question of room and board being also taken into consideration, and the value of the same added to the amount of wages paid, in determining the amount of the assessment.

"Of course, we return your money if we can't possibly place you," said the agent, "but we don't if we can help it. We prefer to give you a second and third choice instead."

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look, "We've got to protect ourselves in some way from tightwads and cheap skates."

My general appearance of poverty and inexperience evidently did not prepossess me very much in the agent's favor, and she soon cut short my inquiries with an imperious wave of her

voice to them rather than to follow the printed pages of the book.

It is the same with the singing of the hymns. There are no elaborate anthems, for these "dopey" hymns, which are full of sound and vocal contention and not upon the beauty of the thought of the words. The hymn is announced by little more than a gesture, the place is quickly found and the chorister leads by guide, the others move simultaneously with her, many of the congregation joining in, many merely watching. The obliging pastor again finds the place for the visitor.

The pastor mounts the pulpit and gives the text of the sermon, later discovered to be Matthew xiv, 16. He is a clear, pleasant speaker. His face lights up, his eyes glow, his lips move—and there is almost a breathless stillness. His hands and fingers speak the words, but his body is motionless. His face lights up, his eyes glow, his lips move—and there is almost a breathless stillness. His hands and fingers speak the words, but his body is motionless.

Rapidly and more rapidly his gestures heap themselves into a climax, when he suddenly stops short and holds forth, his right hand held high, his left hand held low, his eyes fixed on the floor, his lips move—and there is almost a breathless stillness. His hands and fingers speak the words, but his body is motionless.

Nowhere could a more rapt audience be found not in any other church, such devoted attention. These are people who have come for one purpose, and in order to receive the message they want they cannot lean back comfortably, half close their eyes and sleepily half listen. The preacher claims every pair of eyes until the end.

Perhaps the row of little boys over at the side may be excepted. Boys will be boys under any conditions, and it is not impossible to conceive that the fluttering of hands glimpsed, occasionally, behind the shelter of a mother's skirt, might be taking an aside trend once in a while.

St. Ann's Church for Deaf Mutes, with its present membership of over 250, was organized in 1883, when a group of deaf mutes, together with hearing friends, as the tablet placed on the church wall puts it, convened together for worship.

It passed through many vicissitudes, and in 1888, when a group of deaf mutes, together with hearing friends, as the tablet placed on the church wall puts it, convened together for worship.

Down here is the room with two sewing machines where the sewing society meets, the room where church dinners and receptions are held. Provision is made for entertainments requiring a stage and stage setting. Many of the various side issues of the modern church, which the deaf mutes look after as carefully as any other organization.

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hand as she beckoned a more likely victim up to the desk.

At still another agency I had much the same experience. My chief impression of this place, as I recall it, was its tendency to facetious decoration. A number of unique signs prominently displayed gave forth such amusing statements as this:

This is an Employment Agency—Not a Matrimonial Bureau or an Introducing Society.

The significance of the last phrase was lost upon me, but the apparent sarcasm fell short of its purpose. If the indifference of the assembled multitude at that time was any criterion, displayed in conspicuous places upon the walls were two blackboards, each

positions had "just been taken by a lady a few moments ago."

And so I continued my round of exploration, with practically the same result at each successive place. Situations there were in abundance, but only the usual servant girl propositions. In almost every instance I was urged to take one of these positions temporarily until "something better turns up"—the which I was assured would be likely to happen "most any day." None of the positions offered appeared sufficiently attractive or interesting, however, to inspire me with a desire to look them up. I found that help is secured for employers free of charge, while the less fortunate employee must pay a generous fee for a job. The reason for this is obvious, as without such inducements the agency would be unaware of possible opportunities.

To me it seems a matter of general risk, viewed from any standpoint, and I believe it is generally accepted as such. But wherein lies the advantage of the average employment agency to those who have the price of a daily newspaper is a puzzle to me.

I recall my various experiences, there is one which comes back to me with pleasant memories, although I gain no material help thereby. While exploring the vicinity of Burnside and Second streets one morning my attention was attracted by the sign "The People's Institute for Social Work."

I entered the building, more from curiosity rather than any other incentive. There is a branch of the Young Women's Christian Association in this building, and the pleasant woman in charge received me with courteous sympathy. I told her of my experiences in that locality and she seemed not to share the suspicion of the much friendly caution in regard to further exploration, telling me of the reputation some of these places had long borne.

Without revealing my identity I told her something of my story, and she outlined a brief plan of procedure for me, giving me cards of introduction to the managers of several stores, whom she informed me were in need of clerks. She also directed me to the County Superintendent, expressing the wish that I secure some country school in preference to domestic work. There was not the least trace of patronage in anything she said, and her evident interest and sympathy made strong appeal to my loneliness.

Later we made a visit to the free kindergarten, where I spent a joyful ten minutes with the little children, all of whom were clean and happy, although unmistakably poor. The object of this institution is a noble one, and its location gives it ample opportunity for a deal of splendid work, of which the general public is utterly unmindful.

Summing up my combined experiences as a lone and unsophisticated stranger within the city limits, I find the result very much as I had anticipated. While Portland is full of dangerous pitfalls to friendless young women, there are also ample means of protection afforded them, and there seems to be no reason why harm should befall any girl who exercises a fair amount of caution and common sense. Here, as in every other large city, are countless opportunities for good and evil, but with the many noble-hearted Christian people devoting their lives to the protection and care of the stranger, I can but believe that the ordinary intelligence should come to any harm in this City of Roses.

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