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The Garment Makers' Strike of 1909

Brave Girl by Michelle Markel

Brave Girl

A steamship pulls into the harbor, carrying hundreds of immigrants—and a surprise for New York City. The surprise is dirt poor, just five feet tall, and hardly speaks a word of English. Her name is Clara Lemlich. This girl's got grit, and she's going to prove it. Look out, New York!

Clara knows in her bones what is right and what is wrong. What's wrong begins a few weeks after the Lemlichs move into their tenement in America.

No one will hire Clara's father.

They *will*, however, hire Clara. That's right—Clara.

Companies are hiring thousands of immigrant girls to make blouses, coats, nightgowns, and other women's clothing. They earn only a few dollars a month, but it helps pay for food and rent. So instead of carrying books to school, many girls carry sewing machines to work. Clara becomes a garment worker.

From dawn to dusk, she's locked up in a factory. Rows and rows of young women bend over their tables, stitching collars, sleeves, and cuffs as fast as they can. "Hurry up, hurry up." the bosses yell. "*Ratatatatat*" hisses Clara's machine.

The sunless room is stuffy from all the bodies crammed inside. There are two filthy toilets, one sink, and three towels for three hundred girls to share.

Clara learns the rules.

If you're a few minutes late, you lose half a day's pay.

If you prick your finger and bleed on the cloth, you're fined. If it happens a second time, you're fired.

The doors are locked, and you're inspected every night before you leave to be sure you haven't stolen anything from the factory.

She wants to read, she wants to learn! At the end of her shift, though her eyes hurt from straining in the gaslight and her back hurts from hunching over the sewing machine, she walks to the library. She fills her empty



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stomach with a single glass of milk and goes to school at night. When she gets home in the late evening, she sleeps only a few hours before rising again.

As the weeks grind by, Clara makes friends with the other factory girls. At lunch, they share stories and secrets as if they were in school, where they belong. Clara smolders with anger, not just for herself, but for all the factory girls, working like slaves. This was not the America she'd imagined.

The men at the factory tell her they've been trying to get the workers to team up in a union. Then they'd strike—refuse to work—until the bosses treat them better. But the men don't think the ladies are tough enough.

Not tough enough? Because they're girls? Oh, yes, they are. Clara knows it. She'll show them.

From then on, at the sewing tables and on the street corners, Clara urges the girls to fight for their rights.

When the seamstresses are overworked, she says, "Strike!" When they're underpaid, she says, "Strike!" When they're punished for speaking up, she cries, "Strike!"

And the girls do!

Each time Clara leads a walkout, the bosses fire her. Each time she pickets, her life is in danger. The bosses hire men to beat her and the other strikers. The police arrest her seventeen times. They break six of her ribs, but they can't break her spirit. It's shatterproof.

Clara hides her bruises from her parents. A few days later, she's on the picket line again. And the other girls think, "If she can do it, we can do it too."

For weeks the small strikes go on. But the bosses find other young women to do the work for the same low pay and long hours.

We must do something bigger, think Clara and other union leaders. Something huge. A giant strike, at every garment factory in the city.

The union holds a meeting. Throngs of workers pack the seats, the aisles, the walls—the hall thrums with excitement. Clara listens to speech after speech.

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The speakers, mostly men, want everyone to be careful. Two hours pass. No one recommends a general strike. Finally, the most powerful union leader in the country goes up to the podium. Not even he proposes action!

So Clara does. That's right—Clara. She calls out from the front of the hall. The crowd lifts her to the stage, where she shouts in Yiddish: "I have no further patience for talk—I move that we go on a general strike!"



And she starts the largest walkout of women workers in U.S. history.

The next morning, New York City is stunned by the sight of thousands of young women streaming from the factories. One newspaper calls it an army. Others call it a revolt. It's a revolt of girls, for some are only twelve years old, and the rest are barely out of their teens.

In the coming weeks, Clara is called a hero. She lights up chilly union halls with her fiery pep talks. Her singing lifts the spirits of the picketers. When a group of thugs approaches, she yells, "Stand fast, girls!"

And they do. All winter long, in the bitter cold, in their cheap, thin coats, tired and starving and scared, the girls walk alongside the men on the icy sidewalks of the picket line. They spill out of the union halls, blocking the roads, filling street corners and public squares.

Newspapers write stories about them. College girls raise money for them. Rich women—swathed in fur coats—picket with the factory girls.

By the time the strike is over, hundreds of bosses agree to let their staff form unions. They shorten the workweek and raise salaries.

The strike emboldens thousands of women to walkout of garment factories in Philadelphia and Chicago.

And the strike convinces Clara to keep fighting for the rights of workers. Her throat is hoarse, her feet are sore, but she has helped thousands of people. Proving that in America, wrongs can be righted, warriors can wear skirts and blouses, and the bravest hearts may beat in girls only five feet tall.

THE END