

POLLY WANTS A CONTRACT

As told to J. C. FURNAS

**Round and round the conversion circuit
for the widget manufacturer who converted
to wadgets for war—eventually.**

I USED to wear high-heel pumps to work like a lady. Not any more; these last nine months I've been wearing Oxfords and trying all the sore-foot remedies in the drugstores. This is why:

We were feminine accessory manufacturers, selling the dime stores some \$200,000 worth of goods a year. A tidy little business. Pay roll of ten, plus the boss and me; doing well enough for the bank downstairs in our building to keep saying our standing with them was fine—why didn't we use credit?

Late last spring, war shortages in raw materials hit us. We were just gradually folding up. Something had to be done to keep the firm afloat. In June the papers carried stories about how small manufacturers were supposed to convert. The little fellow who made widgets, useless for war, should go get a Government contract to make widgets, part of every Navy yeoman's equipment. So the boss wrote to OPM saying, "O.K., how do we convert?"



"Lady, lady," he said, "you got to be searched before you come in here."

A letter came right back. It said to make inquiries at the OPM's New York office, 33 Liberty Street. Down I went the day after the Fourth of July. The receptionist assumed I was looking for a job. I said, "Not just yet, anyway," and started muttering about my letter from OPM, taking care not to show how vague it was. That finally got me into an office where a kindly man named Garvin—not his name, if you please—was sitting behind a desk stacked with piles of pamphlets.

That looked bad. I didn't want canned information. But pamphlets was what I got—ponderous listings of what the armed forces bought, and why, in peacetime. As soon as I mentioned converting,

Mr. Garvin's hands began flying deftly among the little piles, making me up a complete set of printed matter and popping it into a large Manila envelope. I objected that these things couldn't possibly apply to present conditions; they'd have been out of date by the time they got printed.

He said, "Now, now, just read them, and you'll know everything."

I said it would take a week—it did, too—and I had an ailing business on my hands. "What do we do to convert?"

He said, "Go see the Navy at 90 Church Street." Then he pressed the big envelope on me and I was outside.

I'm a big girl and know the run-around when I get it. So I was prepared for the Navy. A lieutenant asked me what was our line. I told him.

"Sorry, madam," he said. "Sailors don't use 'em."

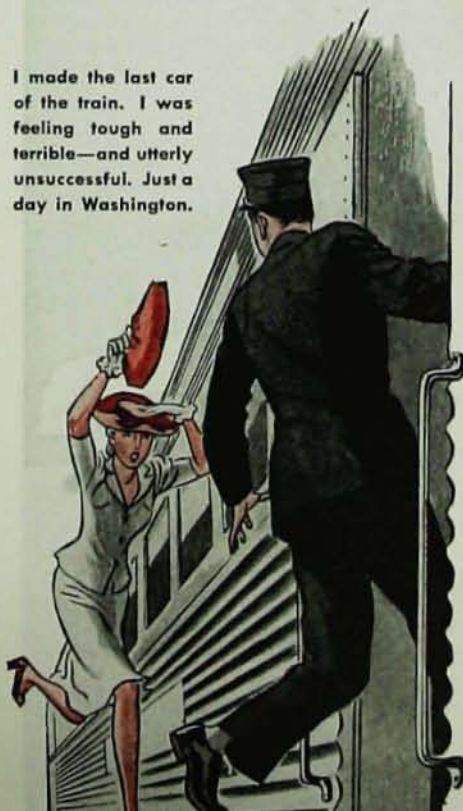
"If they did," I said, "I wouldn't want to bother making things for them. Whom do I see about converting to something sailors do use?"

He sent me to a Miss Scanlon. She said she was the wrong person, and sent me to a Miss Scullen. Miss Scullen suggested I go to 33 Liberty. I said I'd just come from there. A third girl hovering round made sympathetic noises and came out for 33 Liberty too. A unanimous vote, so back I went, asking for a Lieutenant Greening, whose name had cropped up somewhere. Ring-around-a-rosy had begun again, with a Mr. Ramson's name ducking in and out of the conversation. A nice-looking man came up and asked was I being taken care of.

"By experts," I said. "I've already played two games of pussy wants a corner and it looks as if the third was just starting."

He smiled and said, "The only thing that will get you anywhere is to wear them down. Be insistent and persistent."

I made the last car
of the train. I was
feeling tough and
terrible—and utterly
unsuccessful. Just a
day in Washington.



I took the advance check
to the New York office.

I took the advice and wore them down into letting me see Mr. Ramson, who seemed to be important. Without him, in particular, I don't think we'd ever have got anywhere, and I wish I could write his real name. But then, most of them tried to be nice. The impression was one of able and helpful men miserably tangled up in a system that wouldn't make sense because needs had mushroomed up way ahead of normal procedures.

"Off the record," he told me, "wherever you go, be insistent. Go wherever they tell you to and keep coming back. Go see the Navy —"

"I've been," I said. "That's how I got back here."

"Go see the Medical Corps," he went on. "Go to the Quartermaster people and the Gadgetry Division and everywhere else you can think of, and then let me know what happened."

"You might just as well invite me back," I said, "because I'm coming anyway."

That was first round. The boss had been in Gadgetry in the last war, so he prospected them while I was being given the business at other places. For a while we thought he had drawn some blood. The G. D. had on their minds a preparation to cut down glare through bulletproof glass. They weren't satisfied with their formula. The boss volunteered to work on it. For weeks we cooked up messes, smeared them on the windows and squinted ourselves blind to judge the effect. One day the window cleaner ruined three whole days' experiments. We did them all over again, and finally hit something that looked good. The G.D. liked it too. They said they'd turn it over to the Maryland proving grounds, and within nine months or a year it would be tested and approved and we could start talking contracts.

The boss made it hotly clear that in nine months we'd be out of business. Then up came an engineer with news that the old formula was all right if treated under different pressure. It was suggested that we look round for the right machine to do the job. We combed New York for a month and found one built for experimental work, that, with readjustments, would do it well. For sale at \$2500.

"A lot of money to lay out in advance," said the G.D. "We can't conscientiously advise you to buy it."

"I'd be crazy to buy till I have a definite order," said the boss. "I haven't got that kind of money for uncertainties. I've been keeping my people on the pay roll for six months now without any business."

(Continued on Page 66)



HARVEL SELF-O-MATIC winds itself automatically. Waterproof, shockproof, dustproof, non-magnetic, unbreakable crystal. Radium dial assures visibility even in a blackout. 17 jewel movement. \$50.00



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HARVEL

One of America's Fine Watches

(Continued from Page 64)

"John's boy," the old man explained with a beatific smile. "I mean grandson. . . . How's your pa, by the way, Mike?"

"Fine, sir. He's in Washington, of course. And mother is a colonel in some sort of Minute Women regiment. My sister Kate just had an heir; she married Jim Vanastor, you know —"

The general, meanwhile, had stood rapt in thought. Now he turned to his father and demanded, "But who is John?"

"I'll be damned if I know," the old man replied cheerfully.

For the second time that day Corp. Mike King nearly swooned. He recovered in a moment, however.

"You don't mean you invented him, Mr. King?" he asked.

The old man nodded with a cherubic grin. Mike looked at him for a moment and then burst into laughter. At the first burst, Sam Zahoudian collapsed into the chair behind him. His worst fears were now amply proved. Not only was the mess fully as black as he had thought, or blacker, but his companion was even more completely an idiot. But as the laughter continued, Sam recognized that it wasn't, after all, idiotic laughter; it was, shockingly enough, nothing but an excellent example of the belly laugh of the first water. The old man nodded his head and joined in, cackling so full-heartedly that he was finally forced to sit down on the floor to give his stomach some support.

"I saw," he managed to say between bursts, "that it was a question of you being a relation of mine or that Lester Drill was likely to have you shot, so I decided I better have had a Brother John."

"Fast thinking, sir," Mike complimented. "Have you got any ideas to keep us from getting shot now?"

"Just a minute!" the general roared. "Corporal, I demand an explanation!"

Corp. Mike King stiffened to attention, the laughter leaving his face. Briefly he sketched the situation and events.

"And you stand there and laugh?" the general demanded, astounded.

"Wouldn't you, sir, if you saw it in a movie?" the corporal asked respectfully.

The general screwed his face into a scowl that made Sam Zahoudian dig

himself still deeper into the upholstery of the chair.

The general pointed to the billiard table.

"Five will bring you ten you can't make it," he said.

Without hesitation, Mike pulled a large roll out of his pocket, peeled a five from it and laid it on the table. He chalked his cue briskly, surveyed the lay through narrowed eyes, stroked the cue back and forth a few times, then tapped the ball firmly. It went around, bouncing from the cushions at incredible angles, and finally, just barely moving, whisked the red ball out of the way and collided to a dead stop against the other. The general handed over a ten-dollar bill, shaking his head disbelievingly.

"Cora Lee," the old man cried, "if you don't grab that Mike, I'll disown you! Absolutely!"

"Incredible," the general muttered, then added more audibly, "Corporal King, after these maneuvers, when we return to Fort Elkins, you will report to me, prepared"—he paused and smiled—"prepared to enter officers' candidate school."

"Yes, sir," Mike agreed.

"In the meantime, as between first cousins once removed and twice confounded, you will keep these events strictly in the family. At ease."

"You were always my smartest boy," the old man said. "Might of done big things if you hadn't gone into the Army. Let's eat. Turkey is going to be cold. . . . Mike, give Cora Lee your arm. . . . Mr. Zahoudian, I hope you like turkey."

The two tall glasses had by now had an effect on Private First Class Sam Zahoudian. He leaped out of his chair and cried, "The Armored Force never backs out of anything! Lead me to it!"

The old man glanced around and, seeing that the corporal and Cora Lee were going out of the room arm in arm and head to head, and that his son Major General George (The King) King was looking after them with something like a smile of approval, he seized the two tall glasses and poured the remaining few drops down his throat. Then he extended his arm to Sam Zahoudian, who took it and led him somewhat unsteadily toward the door.

The old man licked his lips and muttered, "Damned women."

POLLY WANTS A CONTRACT

(Continued from Page 19)

Well, they said, when things happened, they happened fast, and having the machine would help a lot in landing the contract. But they really couldn't conscientiously —

I told our troubles to our good friend, Mr. Ramson.

"Get a letter of intent from the G.D.," he said.

The G.D. said, well, they really weren't sure when they'd be ordering more glare cutters.

Who would be sure? Maybe Washington.

That was the critical point. We should have swallowed our lesson, washed up the business, fired the help and never gone near Washington. But the disease was in our blood. We had put in too much time—this was August already—to admit our licking.

Along in October, when things were even more so, I asked a keyman, "Does everybody have to go through all this?"

"No," he said. "Most people get discouraged and quit long before they get this far."

Knowing hotel rooms were out of the question and wanting a full business day, I took a four A.M. train to Washington.

The Washington G.D. turned me over to a colonel. I asked him when glare cutters would come alive again. He said he didn't know; probably New York could tell me.

"Don't give me that," I said. "New York sent me down here."

"Sorry," he said. "But here's an idea: Why don't you convert?"

"Such as how?" I said.

"I can't give you details," he said. "Ask OPM."

"If you remember," I said, "this is where I ended up from asking OPM."

So I went round to the office of a weekly news-and-politics dope sheet that the boss takes, and asked them for

steers. They said see a Mr. Highfeather at the Munitions Building—if I could get at him, which was doubtful.

At the Munitions Building I learned Mr. Highfeather's office had been moved.

Where?
Nobody knew. "Men come in and start working at these desks," one receptionist told me, "and by the time we find out who they are, they disappear."

Anyway, I got an impression that a Colonel Leverett across the street was a good man to see. I was halfway down the corridor when a little man in uniform caught up with me.

"Lady, lady," he said, "you got to be searched before you come in here."

"Please don't bother me," I said. "I want Colonel Leverett. Here's my pocketbook; you take it and amuse yourself with it while I'm seeing him." I signed the papers—you sign something every ten feet—and they gave me an identification button to certify I had the run of the place and wasn't a spy, saboteur or fifth columnist. Colonel Leverett was out, but Major Burgh would be glad to see me.

"What can I do for you?"

I told him.
"By the way," he asked presently, "how long have you known the colonel?"

I said I'd never laid eyes on him.
"Then how on earth did you get in here?"

"I don't know," I said. "If you people can't keep track of me with all this signing, how do you expect me to?"

He laughed and suggested that we ought to convert. He told me about a blacksmith down in Texas who was making the metal gadgets that go on homing-pigeons' legs; he was doing fine, six men working for him.

"Maybe we could get in on that—raising pigeons," I said. "Our place is opposite the public library; that's a great place for pigeons."

"You want to be versatile," he said. "Get some machinery to make nuts and bolts."

"Nobody in our outfit," I said, "has any reason to know how you make a nut or which way it twists when you get it made." But he finally did tell me where Mr. Highfeather had moved.

They usually hide the higher-ups separate from the main office—so at least the big shots won't go crazy, I guess. In the lobby at the new address I found one of the biggest shots in the whole defense setup—recognized him from his picture in the papers.

I smiled my best and said, "How do you do, Mr. Topdrawer. How are you?"

With the Aid of Alma Mater

Wondering where he'd met me made him so nervous he ushered me into his office. His secretary was having fits, but she couldn't do anything. I went right to work on my story.

"You have to use ingenuity," he said most courteously.

"How do you think I ever got in here?" I asked.

So he sent me to a Mr. Hassock in the same building. I never did see Mr. Highfeather.

On Hassock's floor I ran into a receptionist with a heart of gold. When she learned I didn't have a hotel room to collapse in overnight if Mr. Hassock couldn't see me that afternoon, she offered to put me up on a cot at her place.

"I do hate to see you go into Mr. Hassock's office feeling tired," she said.

"We call him the one-two-three man—one, two, three, and you're outside again."

"Let's try it anyway," I said.

In two minutes Hassock had me on the three point—the suggestion that I go get ideas from the circus train of exhibits of defense-needed manufactures, then touring the country. I said I didn't know where the train was. He said didn't I read the papers. I said no, handing the sports pages to follow football.

"What teams do you follow?" he asked, lighting up.

"Michigan mostly," I said. "I went there."

"What's your home town?" he said, lighting up more.

"Grand Rapids," I said.

"You don't say so! Know Andy Watters?"

I said, "Sure; he was in my class in high school."

Mr. Hassock said, "I'm awfully glad to know you."

"Hello," I said, sort of weakly.

As Ye Sew

I was with him for an hour and three quarters, mainly talking old times at Ann Arbor. I made the last car of the train when it was already in motion. I was feeling tough and terrible—feet on fire, eyes dead for sleep, dirty, fagged out—and utterly unsuccessful. Just a day in Washington.

Back in New York I reported to Mr. Ramson. "We can push you up to the door," he said, "but we can't open it." He sent me to a Captain Schultz in the Quartermaster Corps.

The captain had a new cue. We could bid on Quartermaster items, he said, only if we'd been in that particular line for a year.

"So what is all this about conversion?" I said. "Nobody trying to convert could qualify. How does that make sense?"

"A year ago we asked business to help us, and nobody did," he said. "Now a lot of them are getting turned down."

"You aren't talking about us," I said. "We'd have fallen over ourselves to give the Government a hand in our small way. Look, is there any sewing in the items you want?"

"Lots of it," he said. "What of it?"

"Plenty," I said. "We're sewers. We've been sewing fancy gift items for twenty years. We have seven sewing machines to prove it. Can we bid on sewing jobs?"

Finally he said O.K. and took me into the sample showroom, full of handkerchiefs and socks and neckties and shoelaces and everything else Uncle Sam issues to soldiers. He said I could bring down our forelady to figure out what we could handle. And he told me to write, with his blessing, to the various depots, including the ones at Hohokus, New Jersey, and Bird in Hand, Pennsylvania, offering to bid on "miscellaneous sewing items."

"Only seven machines" stuck in his throat though. I said we'd done business with plenty of sewing contractors, so he could rest assured we'd find the capacity.

"You better do subcontracting too," he said. "It's a regular line of business."

"What do they call it?" I asked.

"Converting," he said. "They call such firms convertors."

"Heavens to Betsy!" I said. "There's that word again."

I went back and told the boss.

(Continued on Page 69)



Six words describe a wartime duty that every good citizen is glad to face.

When you "buy to last"—no matter what it is—you can't help but "save to win." Buying for longer service means you won't need to replace so soon. And *that* means more materials, more factory facilities, more workers' time left free for Uncle Sam.

No doubt about it...the way you buy has much to do with how soon we win.

THE ELECTRIC STORAGE BATTERY CO., Philadelphia
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Exide Batteries of Canada, Limited, Toronto

For 54 years the name
"Exide" has symbolized
dependability, long life.

Exide

WHEN IT'S AN EXIDE YOU START

(Continued from Page 67)

"Just so there's business in it," he said with a sigh. It was more than four months now since we'd started. The week before, a young lieutenant had come round to check up on our equipment in a national machinery survey. The shop was pretty well dismantled, so, for lack of anything else to inspect, he started thumping his feet on the floor.

"Sounds solid," he said.

"For the Lord's sake, young man," said the boss, "lay off our floor. It's about all we got left by now."

We wrote the depots. A few days later I was out going through the motions again when I got a phone message relayed from my office. It said a big catalogue had turned up for me from Hohokus.

I scrambled back to see. Catalogue size, but with a Quartermaster Corps imprint—stacks and stacks of mimeographed specification sheets and instructions, and so forth. They had given us both barrels. It took hours of steady reading and puzzling. Suddenly the import of one dismal-looking piece of paper got through to me. I grabbed the boss by the shoulder.

"Hey!" I said. "This thing here is an invitation to bid! On penwipers."

He took it and looked at it wearily. "Penwipers it is," he said. "Can we make 'em?"

"I'll find out," I said. It wasn't penwipers, of course. To name the actual item would cause trouble for some of the nice guys who stretched the rules all out of shape to help us—often the only way they could get anything done.

The forelady said sure we could make penwipers. The bid went down and we had a long wait coming. The day before Christmas it was raining cold pitchforks. The boss was moping around wondering if the next step was to send out for a funeral wreath for the company—he had grimly postponed firing the help till after the holidays. Every time I looked at the streaming windows I thought that, if I just gave in, I could show the weather some real waterworks.

Late in the afternoon, here was the phone—Hohokus calling. Our bid was a little high. Could we negotiate it down to a certain figure on only 750,000 penwipers? The boss and I worked both phones rounding up our contractors, and inside an hour we had wired O. K. The day after Christmas we got the confirming telegram, and a couple of days later, the letter of award. We'd already spent most of our possible profits running the things down, but who cared? We had converted. We'd be giving people jobs again.

The Bankers' Gantlet

Or so we thought. The material was going to cost close to five figures and, although we were still good and solvent, we needed financing. Ramson said to bring him a financial statement and he'd help. When I brought it, he just stared at it and made noises.

"Why, you people are financially responsible!" he said. "You've got assets! Only a few hundred owing! Most firms that come in here are so far below water you can't even grab them by the ears. A dozen banks will jump at this."

It had to be banks, because the Quartermaster people couldn't finance us with advances until all available private sources had refused. I went first to the bank downstairs—the one that had always been so eager to oblige when we didn't need it.

The manager looked the figures over and shook his head. "Margin of profit much too small," he said. We were figuring on a little below 5 per cent.

"There's a war on," I said—it was December twenty-ninth. "People think you shouldn't make big profits on war jobs."

"Anyway, I don't like the whole proposition," he said. "It's not your line and it doesn't make sense."

I went to the next-door neighbor. They objected to the profit margin, and anyway, we were much too small a house for so big a contract. I kept on going. Ramson pitched in with suggestions.

Muddling Through

Somebody turned up a warehouseman who wanted the job of storing the material and would get us a loan from a suburban bank he knew. He drove me out there. The president was a retired dentist who made just as little sense as his more professional colleagues in the big-city banks. The warehouseman finally got so wild that he offered to go on the paper himself. All that happened was no. The best we ever got was a sporting offer from a man in the exporting business who wanted half the profits taken out for him before we wrote off rent or overhead.

I thought it was time to tell the Quartermaster Corps that private financial institutions had preferred to decline. A Government advance was permissible, but none had ever yet been put through and no procedures had been set up. In due course I found myself in Washington again—finding out that I needn't have come, because Hohokus could pass on advances no larger than we needed. Then came the performance bond. We couldn't get a bond until we could show financing, and we couldn't get financed until we could show a bond. Finally, they all decided to hold their breaths and take one another's word for it for the few necessary hours.

Anyway, it all dried straight in spite of dumb deliveries and the kind of perpetual trouble that makes you knock on wood as soon as you start thinking things are going all right. When I took the advance check to the OPM's New York office to show the boys, there was a celebration.

I cried a little. Afterward they said they had been trying for months to set up procedures for Government-contract financing, but nothing had happened until we bulled our way through and actually showed it could be done. They made as much fuss about it as if we had invented perpetual motion. We felt we had been doing the same job as the canaries that miners put into deep shafts, to see if the atmosphere down there is fit to breathe.

It was true that the press agents had jumped the gun on the men in charge by promoting the conversion idea before there was any setup to handle it. And the expert brush-off was due to the fact that so many people who swarmed in didn't really mean business and often altogether lacked manners.

The Fourth of July when we started, Christmas Eve when the contract went through, Lincoln's Birthday when the first sample penwiper was finished and approved, so we could get into production.

Life has been kind of dull since. So we have started the wheels going to bid on Army ear muffs. We hear—and hope—that by now things are better.

HERE'S A TRICK YOU CAN UNDERSTAND

PRESTO! CHANGO! SPAGHETTI 'N' SPAM

SPAM 'N' SPAGHETTI
Quickly brown several thick Spam slices in hot frying pan. Serve with spaghetti or macaroni and cheese casserole topped with buttered bread crumbs and grated cheese. A complete meal that hits the spot!

SPAM 'N' SALAD
For a gay and healthful luncheon Spam is just the thing to go with your summery green salad. Arrange cold Spam slices around stuffed eggs, radishes and olives. Let everyone make their own Spamwiches.

COLD OR HOT... SPAM HITS THE SPOT!

HORMEL GOOD FOODS
SPAM • CHILI • HAM • CHICKEN • SOUPS • DINITY MOORE PRODUCTS

SPAM
PORK SHOULDER MEAT WITH HAM MEAT ADDED
NET WEIGHT INCLUDING ADDED FAT 12 OZ.

Eat Meat It Helps You Keep Fit