

# FUTURE OF THE HOUSE WORKER

*"The Coming of the Trained House Worker is Inevitable. When She Comes She Will be as Great a Blessing as the Trained Nurse. In all Probability, the Trained House Worker will be a Greater Blessing"*

By MARJORY MacMURCHY



THE future of the domestic servant depends on the efficiency, or want of efficiency, of the woman who employs her. Substitute the expression "house worker" for domestic servant, and see how it sounds. The writer, for her part, thinks it sounds well. A great deal of wrong thinking is prevalent with regard to girls who do house work for wages. Two instances, of modern wrong thinking, and archaic wrong thinking, illustrate the extremes to which we go when we consider house workers; and as we think of them, so the methods of our employment of them will be.

The modern instance, of what the writer of this article submits is wrong thinking concerning the house worker, comes from a social student who is also an employer of girl wage earners. This social student has accomplished a solid little piece of constructive social work. She has been able to show her employees that their wages depend on their usefulness to the business. According to the girl's usefulness is the size of her bonus; and the usefulness is shown by a table of merits which any girl can understand. Consider the shock it was to an ordinary individual to hear such an advanced social student as this say of a girl who was a house worker—a servant if you prefer to use the time-honoured expression—that she could not take any interest in a girl who had so little wish to improve herself as to be satisfied to remain a servant. One fact seems clear. If house work is so poor an employment that no girl who wants to be well thought of can afford to remain in it, then no right-thinking person should be satisfied to employ a house worker. This is an extreme statement. But the social student, and what she said of girls in domestic work, are authentic.

THE archaic point of view which, although archaic, is by no means non-existent in Canada, is illustrated by a passage taken from "Goldwin Smith: Life and Opinions," compiled by Mr. Arnold Haultain.

"This domestic question is getting very serious," he said to me yesterday, apropos of nothing. Work was over, and he was tired, lolling in his armchair in front of his fire, his legs crossed, his hands meditatively clasped. "And I don't think the young ladies of the present day are going about the best way to fit themselves for wifehood and house work. What frivolous lives they lead! Always on the go! Never still!"

I: "Women adapt themselves very easily to new conditions," I hazarded; "give them a husband and children, they soon settle down."

He: "It may be. It may be. But I do not know what is to be the solution of this servant problem. If you can't get servants, what are you to do? The Chinese seem to me so alien."

I: "The native servant in India becomes quite faithfully attached, and when he grows old he puts his sons and daughters into your service."

He: "Quite so. Yes, occupations there are hereditary. Old and faithful service is a thing of the past now. We certainly are very fortunate in our own household. They all feel that they are part of the household. They form a little society of their own. They know that we should never leave them in the lurch. And they are always kindly treated. But I take it there are not many such households here."

I: "I take it, too, that much depends upon the masters and mistresses."

He: "Ah, yes. Perhaps they are getting out of date, too."

How patriarchal! How idyllic! How condescending! does anyone say?

The truth is, as the world stands to-day in Canada, there is no servant class. The vague shadow of it which remains will be bundled away to-morrow along with so much other dust. Canadians who look for any of these "faithful servitors" who will remain perpetually in feudal employment, their sons and daughters servants after them, are certain to be disappointed, happily so. It is the Canadian statement of the case of the house worker with which we are concerned. What is

the exact condition of this employment to-day in Canada? It is a dream—a dream to be got rid of—to think of a servant class in Canada; and it is a serious injustice, a grave mistake in social construction, to think and speak of household employees as if they in reality belonged to a despised class. There can be no despised classes in the new society which is coming. If we are not ready for these new social relations, we will be the ones who are out of place.

Household workers in Canada are largely imported. Canadian-born girls regard paid household work as an unsatisfactory occupation. A period of from six months to two years in Canada is, generally speaking, sufficient to discontent the imported house worker with her employment. Why is this so? Why do Canadian-born girls go into every other kind of employment?

The wages of general servants in Canada begin at fifteen and sixteen dollars a month, and in rare instances reach thirty-five dollars per month. A fair average varies from eighteen to twenty dollars: Cooks, housemaids, parlourmaids, waitresses, nursemaids, etc., are paid wages of about the same range. The average for a cook is from twenty to twenty-five. A good children's nurse, one who is really responsible and competent, can easily get twenty-five dollars a month. With board and lodging included, counting extras, tips, presents, and considering the fact that many domestic employees receive caps, aprons, collars, cuffs, and sometimes print uniforms and black afternoon dresses, the house worker's pay in many cases will easily average in value ten dollars a week. Comparatively few factory workers, shop workers, or even assistant book-keepers earn as good wages. Many stenographers get no more.

Yet the fact is that girls are reluctant to take up house work as an employment.

At the same time fifty-five per cent. of all women earning wages are paid house workers.

SOME years' study of employments for women leaves the writer still with the conviction that house work intrinsically is the most desirable paid occupation for the average girl. But it is stamped at present as an undesirable occupation.

The girl who is a house worker says it is an undesirable occupation because those who ought to be her friends look down on her. She says she is lonely and has no opportunity to make friends. Her hours are long, from before seven in the morning till after seven in the evening. She may not be working from seven to seven, but she is always on call, even at her meal times. The average time off for a house worker is one afternoon a week, each alternate Sunday afternoon and evening, and two nights a week in addition. One of the chief complaints of the house worker is that her employer may change her day out, or her night out, without warning. The head of a large club of domestic workers says experience has taught her that no domestic worker can promise to undertake any work for the club because the girl never knows when she may not be deprived of her time off. Doubtless, the time is made up to her; but that is very little consolation when an engagement made has had to be broken. Social disability, long hours, loneliness, inability to count on definite time off, are reasons urged by the girl wage earner against house work.

The social student says lack of standardization in the work of the house is the difficulty.

Conditions are as unsatisfactory to the woman employer as they are to the house worker. She has constantly to train new servants. She may teach a girl how to do her work, and in the month following the girl will leave to take work elsewhere at twenty-

five dollars a month. Wages too high for the work required, untrained and incompetent workers, constant change and friction, and great difficulty in finding high class workers, are disabilities complained of by the woman employer.

Physicians say that the health of the paid house worker is not good. Visitors to Canada from Britain, and from the Southern States, often say that too much work is required from one house worker in Canada. The Southern lady asks why we do not allow our house workers to live away from the house at night, attending to the door and telephone ourselves. One of the most hopeful signs for the future of the paid house worker is found in the fact that methods of house work, and house machinery, are being so improved that house work will soon be best performed by educated women of trained intelligence. The fetish of having a paid house worker always on duty will some day disappear.

What do we need, then, to change the employment of the house worker in Canada? The standard of the work and the worker should be raised. Everyone knows what nursing was before the nurse was trained. Most people ought to realize what teaching was before its standard was raised. When trained house work is put on a level with trained teaching and trained nursing, it will be generally conceded that work in the house is the best occupation for the average woman.

The point of view of society—of the woman employer—towards house work as an occupation will have to be changed first.

The trained house worker should know something of nursing. Such knowledge will enlarge her usefulness and raise her standing.

To-day in Canada we should have training schools for house workers, with certificates for graduates. Government-aided hostels could undertake without difficulty an easy beginning of this training. A sufficient number of women employers could pledge themselves to engage only certificated house workers, and in this way help to support the school. An employment agency should be conducted in connection with the school. Health and happiness and fair play are dependent on this course of action for the training of the house worker. Without these honourable characteristics the work of the woman employer as the manager of a house can never be performed satisfactorily.

THE coming of the trained house worker is inevitable. When she comes she will be as great a blessing as the trained nurse. In all probability, the trained house worker will be a greater blessing, since her work is needed by more people. But there is no reason that one can see why the trained house worker should be on duty twelve hours out of the twenty-four. Indeed, she is not likely to arrive until the establishment of fixed hours in household work.

Fixed hours in household work are an impossibility, has been the reply of the woman employer. Is there any reason why a guild of house workers should not be established somewhat on the same lines as the Victorian Order of Nurses—but on a paying business basis, without any contribution from philanthropy? Trained house workers may be engaged for so many hours a day. For instance, the woman who does a good part of her own work may engage a trained house worker from 4 to 7. The household employing a single house worker, with fixed hours, which needs a helper to take care of the children and the house from 7 till 12 p.m., while the heads of the house go to the theatre or play bridge, can apply to the guild of trained house workers. This is one of the ways in which the problem of fixed hours may be met.

At a provincial college in Canada, farmers' daughters are employed as domestics. Other farmers' daughters—exactly the same kind of girls in every particular—attend classes in the college as students. A social gulf exists between them. Isn't such a state of affairs ridiculous in Canada; isn't it wrong? Yet, practically, each of us in one way or another is helping to perpetuate a wrong idea of house work, and the house worker.

