

Unsolved Domestic Problem.

BY VIRGINIA B. PATTERSON.

Times were hard that summer, and the Hilton family found it uphill work to get along.

"If only these half-dozen girls of ours had been boys, they would be earning their own living by this time, and perhaps helping us beside," remarked the father one day in a complaining tone, as he threw himself into a chair to wait till dinner was ready.

"Mrs Adams told me this morning that her oldest girl, Hetty, had just sent enough money out of her wages to pay their taxes this year. You know she's helping over at Whitney's; first-rate girl, too. Whitney said she was the best person they ever had about their house."

"She has to work awful hard, though," said Miranda Hilton, who was at this moment engaged in spreading a very dingy table-cloth on the dinner-table.

"To be sure you would, Miranda. You'd want a place where the lady of the house would be willing to do the work, and let you sit by and suck your thumbs and give the orders," observed the father, sarcastically.

"What wages do they pay Hetty Adams?" enquired Mrs Hilton, her face assuming the first show of interest she had displayed.

"Nine dollars a month; quite a nice little pile by the end of the season. I wouldn't mind making that amount myself," was Miranda's reply as she slapped down a handful of nicked plates on the table with a noisy rattle.

"But I believe I'd rather work in the cigar factory over at Silver Creek; girls get fifty cents a day there."

"And if they pay their board out of it, I'd like to know how much they make?" queried the father. "You don't take into consideration that Hetty Adams got good country board, and that her \$9 per month is clear."

The subject was dropped with the bringing in of the dinner, but was renewed that afternoon between Miranda and her sister Sarah, which conference resulted in a determination to seek a way to earn something for herself.

"I'll not go to the country, though, you may depend upon that," was Miranda's final observation. "I want a place where I can sit down once in a while and take a breath, and that is what no girl can do on a farm. I heard that Mrs Owens, over at the Corners, wanted a girl, and in the morning I'll go over and apply."

Accordingly, the next day, arrayed in her organdy dress and kid gaiters, looking sadly dirty and shabby with the two miles' tramp in the dust, Miranda presented herself at the door of the Owens' mansion.

"Are you a good baker?" inquired the lady, when the visitor had announced her errand. "Because that is one of the essentials in our family. My husband is a sufferer from dyspepsia, and cannot eat poor bread. Our family is small, and the work consequently not heavy, but we want some one in our kitchen who understands how to cook our food so that it will be wholesome as well as palatable."

"Oh, yes, I've always had good luck with my cooking," replied Miranda, gazing at herself in the mirror opposite. "Been making pies ever since I was thirteen years old."

"We care very little for pastry; there fore you would not have much of that kind of work if I employed you. You understand, what we want is not a pastry cook, but one who can get up the common, everyday necessities in an appetizing way."

"Oh, I understand perfectly, and I believe we can get along with each other first-rate," and Miranda beamed patronizingly at Mrs Owens, while she adjusted her hat-strings.

"You say you have never lived out much," mused the lady dubiously; "I'm almost afraid you haven't had sufficient experience. Still, there is nothing like testing these matters," sighing as she thought of the trial of initiating a new girl into the secrets of the pantry and kitchen. "But I'll take you at a venture, and trust that we will be mutually satisfied."

"I've got a tip-top situation," said Miranda, gleefully, bouncing into the kitchen at home on her return. "Only three in family, and they buy their milk, which is brought right to their door, so there's no cow to bother with. Then the kitchen has a painted floor, and only

has to be mopped up occasionally. The well and cistern are handy, and the wood and coal are under the same roof as the kitchen, and I am going to get \$9 a month if I suit."

"Just remember that 'if' as you go along," muttered the old gentleman, from the depths of the rocking-chair. "If you suit. Well the way to do that is to determine to please your employer."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Miranda, pot-tishly, in an undertone to Sarah. "Father needn't worry. I'll get along all right at Mrs Owens'."

Just before the second day closed at the Owens', Miranda began dimly to realize that a mistress's way is not always a girl's way of doing things. She opened her eyes wide at being told that dainty glassware and iron spots and skillets must not be put into the dishpan together, while the righteous horror Mrs Owens displayed at finding Miranda scraping the bottom of a large kettle with one of her best silver spoons was a revelation.

"What nonsense to make a fuss about such a little thing! It shows she's awful stingy. I wouldn't be that particular about a spoon, if 'twas a gold one," thought the new girl, as she angrily vented her wrath on a pretty china dish by bringing it heavily down on the edge of the sink. Unluckily, china is not a material that will bear as rough usage as cast iron, and much to Miranda's indignation, the delicate tureen received a fracture that ended its beauty and usefulness forever.

"Oh, please be careful!" cried poor Mrs Owens, gazing despairingly at the wreck. "If you thump the dishes, they can't help but be cracked and nicked. I see that I must give you a lesson in dishwashing, to begin with. Always wash your glasses and silver, the teacups and saucers first; they are seldom very sticky, and do not discolor the water much. Then put the plates in next; after that the heavier things, and lastly the cooking utensils, taking care to always have an abundance of hot water on the stove to replenish as you need it. Oh! you must scrape the plates first, don't put them into the dishwasher sticking full of crumbs and stuff," gasped the lady, as Miranda coolly dropped a pile of greasy dishes into the pan, leaving particles of food floating on top of the water.

"Now, what a pity! Just see what a condition your dishwasher is in! It isn't fit to put anything else in," and the neat mistress gazed inwardly, at the thought of the herculean task of imparting tidy, sensible habits to this untrained creature.

"Men think they have trials," said she to herself, as she nervously sought the sitting-room, "but they haven't the faintest conception of what a woman undergoes who has such a girl smashing and destroying in her kitchen. But William would counsel me to have patience, I suppose," and she smiled grimly. "I'll try her at bread-baking to-morrow, and perhaps she may partially redeem herself."

But, alas! judging from the comments made by Mrs Owens, as he viewed the "staff of life" piled in soggy chunks at his elbow the next morning, Miranda as a bread maker was not more of a success than as a dishwasher.

"This stuff smells sour, doesn't it, Mary?" he questioned, as he took up a piece, turned it over once or twice, and reluctantly laid it down on the edge of his plate. "I'm a little afraid to eat it."

"Yes, I suppose it's sour," responded his wife, wearily. "You'd be sour, too, if that girl had anything to do with you. The worst nervous headache I've had for months has been brought on today from worrying with her. I found one of my new silver forks in the back alley this morning, where she had thrown it when emptying her dishpan."

"Ignorant, slovenly and careless, and yet wants the same wages as a girl who knows something about her business. Better let her go, Mary, before she kills us outright." When the end of the week came around, a very surprised young woman was seen carrying her valise away from the Owens' in search of another place.

"Oh! well, I ain't going to worry about it! Plenty of other women who want to get a girl," said she, with a toss of the head, as she took her way to the residence of Mrs Brown, a lady living at the other end of the village.

"You have had experience in housework, you say?" said that lady, as Miranda stated the object of her call. "I've been so unfortunate lately in getting good, reliable help. I haven't time to be in my kitchen myself, and I particularly need a girl who can get ahead with the work; I am willing to pay a good price for good help, but I can be bothered with an inexperienced person."

Upon Miss Hilton's reiteration that she considered herself perfectly competent to do all kinds of cooking and general housework, she was engaged and invited to take hold then and there. After lunch, and the dishes cleared away, Mrs Brown devoted an hour or two to showing the new maid where the kitchen things were kept. A tour through the pantry, cellar and the various cupboards

and closets having come to an end, the lady said: "You understand pretty well now where to find the provisions and the cooking utensils. For supper this evening I will not ask you to cook much, as everything is new to you. Hot biscuit, cold meat, tea and stewed fruit, will be sufficient." And Mrs Brown, having given her order, left Miranda to follow it out.

"Hot biscuit!" muttered the girl. "I never made any in my life. I wonder if she means saleratus cakes? Mother always makes ours, and I'm sure I don't know how to go about it."

The question now was, should she follow Mrs Brown into the parlor, where she heard her entertaining some visitors, and make inquiries how to manufacture the biscuit, or should she calmly ignore the request and put cold bread on the table, and trusting to luck to escape from the dilemma in some unforeseen way. There was not much time to lose, for, glancing at the clock, she found the hour of Mr Brown's arrival was near at hand. Accordingly, she laid the table in the style which she noticed that Mrs Owens practiced, made the tea, put on the fruit, and called the gentleman and wife to supper.

"Bring in the biscuit, Miranda," called Mrs Brown, in a pleasant tone, after the tea had been poured. No response being made, the lady rose and came into the kitchen to investigate matters. Not finding Miranda there, she opened the oven door to take out the expected rolls, but found it empty.

"Why, what can she have done with them?" she asked, with a puzzled air. Then going to the window, she called to the new girl, who was sauntering about the yard. "Miranda, did you forget the biscuit?"

"I didn't exactly understand whether you wanted saleratus bread or what kind, and as you had company, I didn't like to come in and ask," was the reluctant answer.

"Oh-h!" the lady responded, in a disappointed tone. "Well, after this I must take pains to give my order more explicitly. But I don't use saleratus or soda. I always take sweet milk and baking powder. Remember, now, we'll have some biscuit for breakfast to-morrow. I tell you in time, so that you can have them on the table promptly."

"Yes, ma'am," said Miranda, hesitatingly. "And will you just step into the kitchen in the morning and show me how to make 'em? You see, I never—"

"Never made up biscuit!" echoed the lady, elevating her eyebrows in surprise. "Why, I understood you to say that you knew all about baking. Oh, no! I can't come into the kitchen and teach you to cook. If I get up and show you how to prepare break fast, I may as well do the whole thing myself, and dispense with a cook."

"It seems like a very queer way of doing, not to let a girl learn how to work," replied Miranda, biting her lips to keep back a sob of vexation.

"You are mistaken. I'm more than willing that you should know how to work," and Mrs Brown laughed in that seemed to the girl an extremely heartless way. "You are supposed to know all about your business before you come to me, and she took her way back to the dining-room, still smiling at the naïveté of her new help.

Similar oversight and acknowledgment the next day convinced Mrs Brown that Miranda was not the kind of a person she wanted, and accordingly she dismissed her with the remark, as she said her "that she would better look elsewhere for a situation; their work was, perhaps, a little different from what she had been accustomed to performing," and coldly bade her good morning.

"Two situations in ten days!" that's getting along swimmingly," said old Mrs Hilton, as the daughter told her story on her return home that day. "I told you that you'd get to please folks if you expected to stay and get paid for your work."

"An angel right from the skies couldn't please such women as Mrs Owens and Mrs Brown," answered Miranda, contemptuously. "They're too particular for any use; Mrs Owens had rules for everything, even to washing dish-towels. They had to be rinsed out and hung up to dry after every meal. There's no sense in going to all that trouble." But a glance at the pile of dirty, ill-smelling rags tossed up on a shelf behind the stove before her, made her stop short and mentally acknowledge that dishes wiped with such foul clothes would hardly please a much less fastidious person than Mrs Owens.

"As for Mrs Brown, she resumed, "she's one of your sweet-spoken, cold-blooded women, that would exactly scold nor tell you right out what is the matter, but never once offers to help nor show you how to do your work."

"The facts of the case is, these folks live differently from what we've always done," said the father. "But if I were going to live out, I'd try my best to learn their ways and make myself useful to 'em; and in the first place I'd work for a good deal lower wages till I could learn thoroughly, and then when I got

the experience I could easily command bigger pay. You take a young man who goes into a store to clerk, or a boy in a printing-office or a mill, to learn the business. Why, they'd laugh in his face if he asked the same wages that they pay their other hands and journeymen! Now, a girl who does housework ought to be willing to serve an apprenticeship just the same as boys do at a trade."

"I'll not work for less wages than Het Adams!" cried Miranda, crossly. "If she can get \$9 a month, so can I, and I know of a place where, I can get it, and get along better than I did at Owens' or Browns. They don't put on as much style as those women do, either. The greatest trouble is, they have three or four children, and I always said I wouldn't work where there were young ones."

"Maybe they'drown a few for your accommodation," replied the old man, dryly. "You'll find, Mirandy, before you live your life out, that there's drawbacks and trials connected with every branch of labor, and it's a mistaken notion to suppose there's going to be any exception made in your favor. I hope when you get into this new place that you'll endeavor to keep it. It's awfully detrimental to a girl to be constantly changing situations. It sets folks against her; they argue she ain't worth much or she'd stay longer."

To these suggestions the opinionated daughter turned a deaf ear. She could not understand that she had been in any way answerable for the loss of her two positions, it was in somewhat of a defiant spirit that she applied the next day to the woman who possessed the obnoxious incumbences known as children. The refusal which met here did not tend to mollify her vexation, and as she plodded on from door to door, seeking a place and being constantly told that her services were not needed, her feelings were wrought up to a pitch of excitement quite at variance with the easy confidence she had felt when first starting out.

"I'll try once more—and if I don't succeed, I'll go over to Silver Creek and get a berth in the cigar-factory," was her despairing comment as she pulled the bell at a modest frame house in the suburbs, to which she had been directed.

Her former experience had taught her the wisdom of claiming to be a proficient in all departments of household work, therefore to the usual category of questions, she guardedly replied that she knew how to do everything requisite in a family, but, of course, as no two ladies worked alike, she might first do precisely as Mrs. Wicks had been in the habits of doing. But she was very apt at learning, and did not doubt that in a few days she would fall in their methods and get along very well. This sounded reasonable, and impressed the lady favorably.

"But I have not been accustomed to paying such high wages," objected she, "and if I were not weak from the effects of a recent illness, I should not keep help. But my daughters are both in school and cannot be of much assistance, so that I am in a measure compelled to do so this summer."

"I never worked for less than nine dollars in my life," said Miranda, loftily, "and that the common price. Mrs Ward, on this street below you always pays that."

"Very true, but you must consider the difference in the size of the two families. There are eight to the Wards; besides they board one of Mr Ward's clerks. Their washings are larger, and they keep a cow, while we have but three in our family."

"I couldn't possibly work for less, and I think a good girl is always entitled to a good price," said the young woman, assuming the sagacious manner of an old, tried domestic, who knows her own value too well to waste time in argument.

A sudden throb of pain in Mrs Wicks' back decided the matter, and Miss Hilton found herself once more established in a new home. By dint of persistent questioning, and calling Mrs Wicks to the kitchen at the most inopportune times to see if this were right or that were wrong, she managed to get through the first few days in a manner sufficiently satisfactory to herself, but one decidedly disagreeable and fatiguing to the lady of the house. Did Mrs Wicks lie down on the lounge for a few moments to ease her spine, the new maid was sure to send a shrill request through the house for her to "just step out a moment into the kitchen and tell her if the bread was light enough to go into the oven;" or "come and look and see if she had put enough water over the potatoes, or "how much salt ought to go in the soup!" Indeed, her solicitousness to have the work done exactly as Mrs Wicks was accustomed to having it done was so great that if the poor lady went out for a walk, or to make a call, everything came to a standstill in the kitchen until her return, for fear that it would not be done correctly. To come home and find no preparations made for dinner, and Miranda sitting serenely with folded hands waiting to be shown, would certainly have had an exasperating effect on the temper of Job himself, and it is not to be wondered

at that Mrs Wicks decided that she and Miranda must part.

"In this way I'm but little better than a prisoner in my own house, since I dare not stir out, owing to the wretched management of Miranda. Of course, it is not a thing for her; she is learning all the time, but I am not strong enough, or wealthy enough, to perform missionary work and pay out nine dollars per month for the privileges, besides having my kitchen furniture and dishes demolished and my nerves ruined. Really, though, I pity such girls; the poor, ignorant creatures ought to be talked kindly to, and shown what a mistake they make in undertaking at a large price what they cannot perform. I think it is my duty to give her some good advice before she leaves."

It was a great blow to our young kitchen maid when Mrs Wicks announced that she would not be able to keep her any longer; for Miranda felt that she was already learning many things that were a decided advantage to her. The greasy, fried potatoes which had always been served up on the home table, sometimes cold and stiff with lard, at others burnt or scorched to bitterness, would not be tolerated at the Wicks' table. By persistent effort and staying going on, the mistress had succeeded in teaching her maid to get up a beautiful and appetizing breakfast dish of delicately browned potatoes, lightly moistened at the last moment with a little cream; a dish so pretty that its appearance alone might tempt the appetite of a queen. The sloppy coffee, made in a pot filled half way to the top with old grounds which she was too lazy to remove until it got so full as to prevent the liquid from pouring, had given way to a much better article under the tuition of Mrs Wicks, and its decided improvement elicited daily praise. In view of these advantages, and the fact that to the lady of the house fell the final touches of every meal that was eatable, coupled with the comfortable thought that she was getting good wages in return for very little work and plenty of time to run around visiting her acquaintances, Miranda was extremely loth to leave so good a home.

"Of course I don't do the work exactly your way—folks cook so differently, you know—but you say yourself that you like my work better than when I first came," said she, coaxingly, "and I think after a few months you would be still better satisfied."

"That is just the point, Miranda," replied Mrs Wicks. "With six months' training, you would give much better satisfaction. But do you think a lady can be expected to take an untrained girl into her kitchen and spend her time teaching her how to cook, how to wash dishes properly, and iron and wash and make starch and sweep, and then pay the girl for being willing to receive this valuable instruction? No dressmaker, or milliner, pays full wages until her apprentice girls have learned the business. Starting with a very small sum, and in some instances no pay at all, they increase it as the girl improves, and not until she is master of her trade does she get full price for her work. This is entirely just. The rules governing household work ought to be on the same sensible basis, and if the housekeepers would do their duty, it would soon become a custom as rigid as the other. City ladies have the advantage in some respect over those in country towns—a girl must bring reference as to competency and character from her last place, and if this reference be given by a just, conscientious woman, it relieves the new mistress of much vexation. But in the thousands of homes throughout the country this course is utterly impracticable, and we must depend entirely on the applicant's own version of her skill or competency."

"I do not want to offend you, Miranda, by speaking too plainly, but in all kindness I must say that you, like too many others, have begun wrong. Had you frankly told me that you knew little of housework and was eager to learn, and for three or four months' tuition you would work for half price, I would cheerfully have undertaken it. You would have been at no cost for your board, and have had all my material and utensils to learn on. The mistakes a girl makes are always the mistress's loss. If you turn up a batch of bread, or spoil a pudding, or carelessly let the milk sour in a hot kitchen, it all comes out of my pocket-book; you do not pay for it. You see everything is in the girl's favor."

But Miranda shook her head. She could not humiliate herself to submit to a reduction of pay when her services were really more valuable than when she first came. Besides, was she going to have it said that she couldn't get as high wages as Hetty Adams? No, indeed! So, once more packing the valise, and donning the organdy and kid boots, she set out for the Silver Creek Cigar Factory, four miles, when she speedily made an engagement at \$12 per month. It being too far to go home every night, she took boarding at a cheap house near the factory, where many of the hands were quartered; and for the poorest, half-cooked table fare, which was most repugnant after enjoy-

ing the bitter grades of food which had been furnished at the Owens', Browns' and Wicks', and the miserable bed which she was to share with another girl, she agreed to pay \$2 per week. The long walk home on Saturday evenings and the return on Monday, the soon discovered to be sadly destructive to her shoes, and at the end of a month when her board deducted, all her wages were spent in buying another pair.

And thus the unprofitable months passed. Unable to lay up a cent of her salary, her mode of life full of temptations, and rendering her impatient of parental restraint, she became less fitted every day for the happy and economical conduct of a home, whether of her own or that of some one else.

Miranda Hilton's history is the history of thousands of young women who have yet to learn that skilled labor is ever in demand, and no department brings such satisfactory returns in a sense of usefulness and the acquiring of neat, methodical habits, as in that most important department of the household—the kitchen.

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