

THAT PHANTOM, THE UN-HIRED GIRL

The Experiences of Henry Hatch, as Told by Henry

CONSIDERING all the experiences my wife has had in two years of getting on in the world with other women, I am quite entitled to take occasional refuge in poetry. In this connection, apropos of the hired girl, I suddenly burst out one evening to her with this of Wordsworth:

"She was a phantom of delight
When first she dawned upon my sight:
A lovely apparition sent
To be a moment's ornament—"

"Oh fudge!" says she, flinging down the want-ad section of the evening paper, our daily literature.

"Well, isn't it an exact description? Every time we get one of those people doesn't she start off with being an ideal and end with being a nuisance?"

She couldn't deny this.

"Henry," she said, "I think Eve must have been a happy woman."

"Why?" query I, knowing very well what the answer is.

"Because she never had to have a hired girl," we both repeat, simultaneously.

"Yes, but she had a snake."

"Really, is that any worse?"

This was the language of exasperated impatience. On all other matters my wife is the soul of toleration. In politics, religion, fashion and social matters she is evenly unruffled. On this hired girl phantasmagoria she has become a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. Since we entered the assistant-domestic zone of our career through space the hired-girl problem has shown worse symptoms than the cost of living or the course of moral reform or any other strenuousness. Now that soldiers have married half the available girls and nine-tenths of the other half have become munitionettes, the problem has become what statesmen call a crisis. On the off chance that ten-elevenths of married people in Canada have had experiences along this line hitherto unexpressed in either poetry or prose, I take the liberty of reviewing the vista of females whom it has been our privilege to entertain like angels unaware; the Offagins, Onegins, Gonegins and Finnegins who have come upon us like humming birds into a garden.

FIRST came Arethusa—black-haired, sharp-nosed and taciturn, nationality uncertain, leaning towards Scotch. The third evening she had a caller in the kitchen—a man who told her quite audibly through the dining-room door that she was a fool to be living in that suburb and must be off out of it. Very next evening Arethusa announced that an old maiden aunt in Montreal was very ill and she must go to nurse her. In an hour's time comes a rap at the front door:

"Is that trunk ready?" asked a red-faced, burly one—and it was he.

I helped him humbly down with the baggage, out to a dray which he said was not his, but the teamster that drove it was ill, and the old lady in Montreal was certainly in a bad way.

"She's got ammonia," said he. "Girl's got to nurse her."

And that was the last of Arethusa.

Our next was a miracle of 100 per cent. efficiency, a Scotch-Canadian. Heaven seemed to have endowed Maggie with all the virtues of good housekeeping. She loved the baby. She kept the schedule. Woe betide me if with breakfast timetabled at 8.00 I arrived at 8.05. Maggie never scolded me, for which I am thankful, for she had a capable tongue. She looked dourly. That was enough. No, she never flung things on the table. All she ever visited me with was that uncompromising scornful look, as though I had any business being a man of affairs if I couldn't keep my engagements. It was so also with the dinner. And with dishes washed in a jiffy or two, Maggie was ready four evenings a week for the long trail into the city, never once in all her six months of governing our household accompanied by anything so superfluous as a male. Promptly at midnight, sometimes at one and two a.m. she came back alone through streets that skirted railway tracks and might have harboured footpads. Was she timid? We never dared suggest it. He would have been a bold bad sandbagger who would have dared to molest Maggie. And I sometimes think that if I had been less humble and had ever dared to be more domineering we might have kept her ever

TRANSCRIBED BY AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

without increasing her wages or building her a private staircase or bribing her with a taxi twice a week to take her down town. But Maggie hankered once again to be in a factory, where she had a real man boss, higher wages and all her evenings to do as she pleased. The last I heard of her she had resigned her position in a munitions factory at \$14.50 a week, and was en route in a pink silk-knit coat to the Old Country to see what the Zeppelins looked like.

Next in line of succession came Myra, a dimple on the chin of inexperience. As the baby was six months old now we thought a young girl that could take him out perambulating, play with him a bit and give a little first aid with the meals might do us very well. Myra was a small bundle of inconceivable proclivities; a quiet, shy little fawn who sometimes over the scullery sink sang sweetly the latest popular, got on good terms with the baby, went out o' nights, came back at unconventional hours, sometimes sat on the boulevard with a young man who she argued was her very own brother, never pretended to cook, was not partial to cleaning, kept her room in a state of dishevelment and made up for what few defects she had by skilfully annexing my wife's silk stockings, handkerchiefs and other small articles too numerous to mention. Whereby we decided to separate her from the baby and to let her go.

MYRA was followed by another experiment. The young damosel had been a failure. We decided to try the other extremity in emergency, a woman of experience. The net result of advertisements and interviews galore was Rebecca; age, sixty and upwards, alleged 42; black-haired, thin, anaemic and weird; a maiden lady who scorned men as she always had and looked at first as though she might straddle the carpet-sweeper, kidnap the baby and never be heard of again. Rebecca had many ailments, the chief of which was nerves. She had a horror of street-cars and transfers, and she made all her journeys on foot. Whenever she got back about 11 o'clock she persisted in settling down in an arm-chair in the parlour to tell my wife all about her wayside experiences, not even recognizing my existence.

And of course her tenure was brief. Rebecca was an experiment in psychology. The experiment failed. However, she said she hated to leave us in the lurch and any time we found ourselves alone in the world she would be glad to return for a day or so. She has never returned.

After ten days' rest—real rest in the kitchen doing our own work after the ten weeks of hysteria with Rebecca—came another young person, Pauline. This candidate for a happy marriage had many qualities to recommend her. She was madly fond of the baby, perfectly trustworthy in taking him out, liked to have him in the kitchen, and was desperately in love with one or other of two young men, which of them most was hard to determine. One was absent, the other less so. Each came in upon occasion from somewhere or down from the north. One got jealous of the other. He criticized Pauline's clothes. That was quite unkind. She did the best she could with the togs she had, but never seemed to hit upon a happy ensemble of boots and hat, and in the matter of anything between depended largely upon her own craft with the needle, which was quite as precarious as her choice of colours. The other swain used to find fault with the way Pauline wore her hair, which to be sure was a bit capricious, but never bad enough to cause a lovers' quarrel.

Pauline was madly in love. She was contrived that way. Life to her, in service or out, was one long dream of walks in the park, goings to church, circuses, nickel shows and fairs. Whereby at last she swiftly threw overboard both the jealous lovers and took up with a sudden flame that had once burned on a neighbouring farm and now came down from the bush country to see the city and wanted at once to consume Pauline. He had enlisted, but had bought himself out, preferring to show his love of country by marrying Pauline and bringing up a family, if she would let him. She announced that she would marry the young man, and went about singing, "Never Let the Old Flag Fall." She did so. And that was the last of Pauline in our household.

Next came Madam Maypole. By this time baby

was becoming experienced in woman-kind and able to adapt himself to anybody. Madam Maypole was

advanced in years, had an overplus of respectability, was at least ten years older than the census allowed and had a long vista of memories extending back to the good old days in Halifax and Montreal, where she seemed to have spent two successive girlhoods. She afterwards got married, happily relieved of her husband by the latter's death, and was now something of a compromise between a domestic, a lady's maid, a senior housekeeper, a nurse and a governess.

Madam was a tantalizing experiment. One of her accomplishments was singing old operatic arias which she did in a querulous quaver that would have put any but a deaf child to sleep. When she got weary of these she had recourse to Loch Lomond and Last Rose of Summer, which she dinged to the baby in weird portamentos and little yeupings of joy. By the time her repertoire was done the baby was fast asleep and she was ready for another evening of reading the patent medicine ads in her favourite newspaper, which she paid for herself and kept a litter of them on fyle in her room with other nests of them in the cupboards. She had a horror of mice which seemed to take a joy in following her because she left so many comfortable litters to inhabit. But her feet grew weary in well-doing. With what money she had saved from patent medicines—always the latest cure-all, especially in any form of wine—she decided to retire from domestic duties. I believe she had a secret desire to see more fine folk than habitually came to our house, for she was delirious about dresses, functions and funerals. She went, much to our regret as an entertainment.

NOW the problem is up again and it will not down. We must have a maid. Munition factories have taken most of them; soldiers have married others; there are few immigrants; domestic service is no longer a necessity in a land where women are scarce compared to the jobs that want them. We tried one of those bureaus, a machine that telephones just as you are putting the baby to bed that a certain girl is corralled one mile away at the bureau and can you come down to see her before somebody else gets her, as you have first choice? By the time the baby is asleep the telephone rings to say that the girl has got tired waiting and has taken another engagement. Your name is still on the waiting list.

One day misfortune thrust a bureau girl upon my wife—I was away—in the person of Kate Finnegan. Kate, so I gather from the recital of her one-night adventure under our roof, was the peer of them all. She refused to get herself anything for breakfast but dry bread and tea, and when the bureau procuress met her with my wife down town in order to effect the transfer of Kate's passage money, etc., from Cork, she up and told the woman before my wife's face that Mrs. Hatch had put her to sleep in a dirty room and had refused to give her anything for breakfast but dry bread and tea. So Kate also went the road.

Now we are reconsidering the problem. We intend to try a new dodge. We must advertise. The ad must be alluring. It must read about as follows:

Wanted—a young lady assistant to a lady with one child; work light; no washing nor ironing; twenty dollars a month; plenty of the latest novels always on hand; piano-player available at any time; no mice; convenient to street-cars; two blocks from church; all Sundays off if desired; very little company; people strictly respectable—best of references, etc. Apply Elite Hotel between 4 and 5 any afternoon.

We choose the hotel in order to entice the girl. Having engaged her amid the glamorous allurements of a tea-room, we propose to send a taxi to bring her out by night, going clear round the city so that she never can find her way down town again. We shall put her to bed in the best room in the house as soon as she arrives, take her breakfast up to her the first morning and say unto her, "Clarissima, you are to be our guest without a dot of work for three days. Your pay will go on as usual. After that you will gradually do whatever you feel like without assistance until you feel inclined to take over the management of the house. By that time you will conclude that we are very nice people, that baby is a very desirable companion and we shall all get along famously."

That is the present plan. How it will work out probably depends somewhat upon Clarissima. And she has not yet arrived.