

of their sex; though, perhaps, owing to the very fact of their special personal connection with it, they are not always able to consider it quite fairly and dispassionately. Yet they must remember that they have keen eyed critics ready to detect any inconsistency between large professions and imperfect practice. The annual meeting of the National Council in Toronto was scarcely over before certain popular journals plainly intimated that, in their opinion, its members were more ready to take up any other reform than that in which they could do most—the amelioration of the condition of the domestic “slaves,” as one paper expressed it. Now, there are many sorely tried mistresses who will be apt to consider this expression more applicable to themselves than to the raw and inefficient workers in their kitchens, so ready to leave them in the lurch on the shortest notice and the slightest pretext. But we must remember that this is a question with *two sides*, and that the problem, being ultimately one of human nature, has as many variations as there are differences of character in mistresses and maids; and that there is a dark side to it for the servant, as well as for the mistress, is only too certain.

Not long after the last annual meeting of the National Council of Women, there were brought to the notice of the writer certain grave charges against a certain class of mistresses, coming from an observant resident in one of our cities (not Toronto), a man who has, for many years, taken a deep interest in the welfare of our female workers, especially in young girls obliged to toil for a living. These charges were based on his own personal observation, and, as his object was to call the attention of women—especially of *mistresses*—to the evils whereof he complained, there can be no reason why this should not be done by quoting his own words. In doing so, it may be well to premise that the experience of some of us, at least, does not justify quite so darkly coloured a picture, and, though there are, doubtless, too many cases such as are pictured in the following passages, we would fain hope that they do not represent the *average* treatment of domestics in Canada, at least.

His first charge is that the hours during which they are expected to be on duty are frequently too long. He says, as to this: “The demand for eight hours’ labour (in factories) is reasonable, but not a word has been said of the ordinary day of a domestic servant, which averages from twelve to fourteen hours, seven days a week, while the factory hours are only for six days. Domestics, as a rule, are on duty from seventy-five to eighty hours every week, making full allowance for meal times and ‘nights out.’ The Sabbath too often stops at the kitchen door, even of ultra-Sabbatarians. There are thousands of these whose ordinary day averages up to fifteen or sixteen hours; indeed, they can be called upon for service any moment in the twenty-four. Even the privilege of ‘a night off’ has little value to a girl who, in most cases, has to spend half the time from 8 to 10 in going to and from her home for a brief visit. How would any mistress like such a miserable allowance for social enjoyment, or communion with her parents and family connections? How can any woman treat girls as many domestics are treated, and yet be doing to others as she would have others do to her?”

“I have learned much,” he continues, “since I began enquiries into this matter, from direct sources. There are hundreds of houses in this city in which it is impossible for a servant to lead a Christian life, opportunities for worship being denied her, sometimes by reputedly pious mistresses. In many cases the sleeping-rooms for girls are down under ground, in damp cellars, where the sun never shines, nor even broad daylight comes. I have seen dozens of such places in houses I have inspected when they were open at renting time. My blood has boiled at the sight; yet ‘ladies,’ women, mothers, put young girls down in such holes to sleep, and to pass any chance leisure hours they may get. I have personal knowledge of two noble-hearted girls, who each maintained a widowed mother, who were ruined in health by sleeping underground, as dozens more are being slowly done to death in the Christian homes of this city. Yet these poor girls are never allowed to breathe the free air, except at night, once a week, for a couple of hours, or, by a very special favour, an hour or two on Sunday afternoon between meals. You ladies spend your philanthropic energies over matters which involve no self-sacrifice, or war with the conventionalities of that woman’s bugbear ruled by Mrs. Grundy. Of all hollow, senseless cries, the one complaining of girls preferring outside work

to domestic service is about the silliest. Are they not human? Have they not the social instincts of their sex? Have they no family ties? Are they, alone, to be shut out from the enjoyments of companionship? On the moral, educational, and spiritual bearings of the question I will not speak. Were I to expose to you what I know of the immoral results of domestic slavery and of service in stores, I should give you a painful shock.”

In the second letter, the writer goes further into the subject. “Thirty years ago, I was lay visitor in Brighton, England, in a parish of 6,000 people, ninety-one per cent. of whom were in extreme poverty—large numbers living by vice—some by crime. Hundreds of these poor creatures had been in service; several of them were ‘season servants,’ being only engaged when visitors were numerous. I was commissioned by a newspaper to make thorough inquiry into the condition of the lower orders in two very large towns. This brought me into contact with many hundreds of young women working in houses, factories, and shops. Since I came to Canada I have pursued the same line of social studies, so I may be allowed to claim a practical knowledge of this subject possessed by very few. I can affirm, from the direct testimony of scores, that the burden of domestic service, the interminable hours of labour, and other disagreeable conditions, have led a multitude into vice. The longer the bow is strained, the stronger the reaction when loosened; so with all workers—the longer girls are kept at work in houses or stores, the stronger becomes the desire for excitement when free. The over-strung nervous system demands some stimulant; hence overworked girls are easily tempted with dangerous pleasures. Many a poor girl has rushed into evil when angered by the bitter consciousness of unfair treatment and of the cruelty of her lot.”

He then describes a case in which a girl of superior attainments and character left a place as nursemaid, considered better for her health, and went into factory work, saying, “I would rather die soon than have to work so many hours every day of the week.”

“There is truth in what you say about hard task-mistresses often being those who have been hardened by having to work hard themselves. But the ways and the whole tone of modern society harden the hearts of mistresses. I once heard a girl say, ‘Mistresses think of nothing but getting as much work out of us as they can squeeze, and when we are not at work, if it is ever so late at night, they seem miserable.’ A girl can ‘leave,’ it is true, and so is not a ‘slave’ in the strict sense; but leave to go where? To another place, with a character possibly injured by the mistress she has left.”

And then follow words which have a wider application, and which, it is to be hoped, express the true spirit and attitude of the Women’s Council.

“If the Women’s Council will go boldly into the work of the poorer classes, with divine courage, with tender sympathy, with a passionate hatred of oppression, injustice, and all forms of wrong, they will find a field of labour abounding in such opportunities for the service of humanity, and the help and the blessing of Him who accepts, as to Himself, a gift of cold water to a thirsty sufferer will be their strength and their reward.”

There will be many who will be likely to say, on a superficial view, that the picture above given is too darkly coloured; but those who look beneath the surface, and see how the spirit of selfishness pervades our whole social life—leading to oppression as its natural outcome—will not be so ready to think these words of warning unneeded, especially as the eyes of employers are, in general, more apt to be directed more towards the shortcomings of their domestics than their own. Especially in large cities, where there is often a too ambitious struggle to live in a style outrunning their means, is the household drudge apt to have a hard time of it, and, as a very little observation would convince us, the Golden Rule is far from being generally applied in our relations to our dependents. Anyone who knows how carriages are kept waiting for perhaps an hour at a time, on one of our bitterest nights, when men and horses frequently suffer severely, must know to a tolerable certainty that the same lack of justice and consideration will characterize the other domestic relations of those who so act in any case. It is the lack of consideration and sympathy that is at the root of the trouble; the old story that

“Harm is wrought
By want of thought
As well as want of heart.”