

TREASURE

BY THYRA SAMTER WINSLOW

EDNA has worked for me for eight years and a half. Five or maybe six times I've fired her because of my misunderstanding of her philosophy of life. Then, after half a dozen slatterns have gummed up the seemingly simple processes of the household I've asked her to come back. And always she's given up her new job—Edna is never out of work—and returned, with no loss of dignity, no hashing up as to which of us was wrong. I may fire her again, but I'm sure I'll ask her to return, and I hope she will.

Edna is my colored maid. Clinging to the habits of an Arkansas childhood, I usually refer to her as my cook, though her duties are far more complex than any cook's. She keeps the house fairly clean—but cleaning is not her best accomplishment. She does all the laundry and she is a good laundress, though she hates to wash. She does all of the cooking, except when I help, which means extra work for her. She's an excellent cook.

By some curious method she is able to cook and serve a meal simultaneously, as quickly as if there were a second girl, and to listen to the dinner conversation at the same time. Not only listen but comment on the conversation and the guests the next day, with or without encouragement. She enjoys preparing large suppers on Sundays. She is a little bored when we do not have much company.

Edna gets \$50 a month. And if she has bought any clothes since she's been with

me she wears them in secret. She has never complained of a cut, never seemed especially pleased with a raise. She has never saved a cent and is usually in debt, though she is always planning to save money. She pays twenty-five cents a week toward life insurance of \$500, made payable to her mother for the purpose of a nice funeral, and she gives her mother \$5 a month. She makes presents of clothes to members of her family, who wear them, she says, but aren't very grateful.

Edna is in her thirties. She is, by her own description, a brown-skin girl. She's proud because her hair is long and stays straight for a long time after it's been dressed. She envies all members of her own race who are fairer, and refers to anyone who is darker as "that old black thing." Her figure is good and her legs so shapely that my male guests comment on them. The men of her own race prefer fatter legs.

Edna was born in Amityville, Long Island. Hundreds of her relatives live in the neighborhood and hold various jobs, mostly domestic. One is an automobile mechanic, one a porter, one a bootlegger. Her step-father, a gardener, kept one job for twenty years.

Her ancestry would confound a genealogist. In the offing are a full-blooded Quogue Indian and a Dutch trader. The trader lived in Lindenhurst. When his wife died, leaving him with four children, he hired a colored girl named Sarah to keep house. Sarah had five children. For

many years after the old man's death his white and colored descendants had a yearly picnic, but lately, Edna says, the whites no longer recognize their colored relatives.

Edna went to school until she was thirteen and through the fifth grade, working, in Summer, from when she was ten. It has never occurred to her to rebel against domestic labor.

Edna's mother did day's work, laundry and cleaning. The children, left to themselves, got along without mishap. Edna's mother had two husbands, brothers and both dead now, and nine children, eight of them still alive.

Nothing was wasted. Edna's grandmother, who worked out, too, took a basket with her and brought home tit-bits, a piece of sausage or a bit of vegetable. All left-overs went into the soup pot.

Breakfast was last night's supper warmed over. Potatoes and a bit of pork and bread. Pancakes in Winter. And, on Sunday, fried chuck steak and brown gravy. Supper was usually a pork stew or fried pork with potatoes, fish on Wednesday and Fridays—Edna's grandfather was a bayman—and chicken on Sundays. In Summer there were greens with the pork. The children grew into strong healthy adults.

When she was twelve, Edna hated her baby brother because she had to take care of him. She decided to kill him as the easiest way out. She had heard somewhere that if she fed him sour milk he would die and no one would suspect the reason. But Kenneth waxed more and more healthy! Then Edna was sent out to work for the Summer.

"When I got home the first thing I saw was a beautiful little brown-skin boy. It was Kenneth. Wasn't I glad he hadn't died!"

Edna and her sister Ethel played a game of pretending to be white, "talking like white children" on their way home from school. "Now I'm Elise Manning. I've got long light curls. Now make out I'm crying because I can't have a new light blue silk dress. And I live in a house with seven rooms and my room has pink curtains!"

Each Friday the children got a nickel apiece for spending money. They usually went to a place three miles away where there was a merry-go-round. Now came a problem. You could spend the nickel for candy. Or for a car ride home. Or for a ride on the merry-go-round. Or, by waiting until eleven o'clock, you could get, in addition to the regular ride, the last ride free. Usually they'd wait, little round-faced brown children, until eleven, have that last fine free ride and trail home, tired but contented, over three miles of country road.

II

Edna's first job was "helping out Mrs. Ganner", who needed someone only in Summer, when her daughter and son, in vaudeville, were at home. Edna washed dishes, set the table, dusted, went on errands. She finished the supper dishes—she admits she was slow—at nine. She got \$1.25 a week, which went for her Winter school clothes. She got fired before the Summer was over because she stole cookies. She had tried to keep her hands off them but she'd find herself taking just one more.

When she was twelve she worked as a handy maid in a small Summer hotel. She helped the waitress, the chambermaid, the cook. The hours were from seven to nine and the wages \$1.50. Hard work but good food, like creamed fish and hot rolls.

When she was thirteen and through with school, able to take care of herself, she got a job in a nice home at \$6 a

month. Cooking and house-work and a little laundry. She might have kept that job a long time but she did a terrible thing. She cut a bow of ribbon off an evening dress! She knew it was wrong. But she wanted it so much and the woman had so many clothes! Now she doesn't see how she had ever thought she could get away with it. She was fired in disgrace. The family scolded. They were decent people!

At fifteen she ran away to Washington with a girl cousin. She stayed there two years. A year at Martha Washington Seminary as a kitchen maid, envying the girls in school. When school closed she worked in a hospital as a ward maid. That was easy. Only one ward and a diet kitchen to take care of. But after a year there she wanted to come home. And before long she was working on Long Island for the Whelans. Four dollars a week for house-keeping and taking care of two children.

Edna didn't run around much with boys. Only to the movies or a church fair. She was a good girl. When she was eighteen she met Wilmer Bond and two months later she told him she'd have to be married. Her fears were unfounded but she was married before she found that out. If she had known as much about things as she knows now, she says she wouldn't have married at all.

Marrying Wilmer was rather a step up, socially. One of his sisters was a musician, another a professional dancer. The youngest, proudly, had never done a day's work. Other relatives worked in Harlem as musicians or bouncers in night clubs.

Edna kept on doing house-work. Of course. Wilmer was a house painter, though he played the drums, too, and gave up painting when orchestra jobs were obtainable.

Edna was introduced to night life. Harlem. Jazz. Whites who wanted to go

with colored people. Colored folks who "passed" or were proud because their friends were ofays. She learned to smoke, to drink, to wear evening clothes.

Every week Edna took her money home to help pay for the house they were buying. She always had a job. On each job she learned things, German, Jewish, Italian cooking.

Wilmer was a better musician than a husband. When she was married ten years he gave her one black eye too many or she learned she could get away. She doesn't see any advantages in marriage.

Edna has her own idea about morals. She always has one boy friend, and while she is with him she is true to him. But she never lets him interfere with her job. Drinking is the only thing that ever does. Many a time I've tried prettily to make small talk during dinner while Edna, glassy eyed, swayed in with the dishes. She has never actually let me down, but it's a strain.

Edna distrusts all West Indians and suspects all new acquaintances of having West Indian blood. She thinks their accent an affectation. "They had to come here to get along, and then they brag about where they came from." She thinks Southern Negroes are shiftless and is jealous of their cooking ability, which she thinks is overrated. She doesn't mind a Southern man "after he's learned our ways."

Edna is good company. She has uncanny intuition and poor judgment. She is smart—and illogical. She judges by curious externals, by flashes rather than a survey of facts. She can be amazingly right or wrong.

She enjoys gossip and sometimes exaggerates or carries stories because of the excitement she can cause. She takes pride in her work and is economical and extra-

gant in spells. She is loyal and, I am sure, respects those she has worked for and their secrets more than they have respected her and her confidences.

Since she has left Wilmer Bond she associates mostly with her family, her current boy friend and a few girls who work in the neighborhood. She likes dancing and the movies. Occasionally she goes to a party in a "private house," where there is a charge for supper and gin. Usually she sits around with a few friends. The conversation is rudimentary, but there is always something to drink and usually something to eat, too. Most of her friends play the numbers. Some of them play cards—whist, *not* bridge. Edna does not play.

III

To her and her friends the Depression is something for the white folks to worry about. Nearly everyone she knows is working. Some were always out of work, anyhow. They've had to take cuts, but there's enough left for the numbers, for gin on Saturday nights, or an outing. There's always a boss's car that can be borrowed, a new dress if you need one. If you're hard up you can give a rent party or someone will help you out.

There's no question of saving. Edna knows she's too good a cook to be without a job for long. If times are hard you may even have to work in the Bronx and "keep *kosher* kitchen," sort of slurring things over when you aren't being watched.

In Edna's crowd there has never been any question about the equality of the sexes. You can have an affair or so before marriage and still marry happily, if you're likely to marry happily at all. And if you're not living with your husband there's no reason why you must be without affection. Too many nice colored men have left

their wives and are hungry for love. You have to work, anyhow. And if you get tired of one —

Edna thinks that, except for a few highly talented colored people such as Paul Robeson and Bill Robinson and Billy Pierce, going with white people is an affectation. The whites who want to go with colored folks are terrible, for one thing, and do it just to show off. They are either condescending, degenerate, or just white trash underneath. Colored folks, when they are with whites, never act natural, anyhow.

Of course Edna wishes things were different. If she had a million dollars the first thing she'd do would be to go into a fine restaurant and have a good meal. She'd have a nice house in a swell neighborhood and a car. And she'd buy her mother a little three-room house so the old lady could take things easy. She'd see that Ethel, her favorite sister, had more money, and that Ethel's four children got good educations. And she wishes she had a little money laid by.

But she hasn't any. And she'll always be colored. She looks young—colored girls look young for a long time—but she feels she isn't so young any more.

Eight years and a half in one place, even with time off for bad behavior, is a good record. Even so, housework and cooking, day after day, and putting up with other people's whims—And how can you tell if the mistress will be in a good humor? Or if she'll change your day off at the last minute? Or if the boss will be late the night you'd planned to go to Rockaway?

Still, with your own room and bath, and easy hours, and a mistress who is fairly reasonable, and a boy friend who is more considerate than a husband, and a chance to save money if you ever get to it, maybe things aren't so terrible for a colored girl, after all.

A FRESHMAN AT FISHBONE

BY JAMES STUART

I AM not much of anybody. I may be called a nothing, or a poor white, or a game rooster, or Jim Stuart: it doesn't matter. I am one who has everything to win and nothing to lose. I have even weight to gain. I have just finished high-school and I weigh only 103 pounds. I am fourteen years old, but I have man ways. I am able to drive tacks with a pistol, and nails with a rifle. I am able to run a cutter plow in new ground with two good steady mules hitched to the beam. I can use ax, spade, hoe and scythe. I can do a man's work on the farm.

But I want to leave the soil. I want an education. I hear so much about the education of poor mountain boys. When educations are given to them they make Governors and Presidents. So I want an education to put in a basket and show it to people. Now, after this brief introduction, allow me to explain how I got all the education I have—got the black eye, I should say.

There is only one in our family who really has any such thing as an education—I mean to say, a college education. The other five read and write from poor to terrible. So I take the advice of my brother. He tells me of a school in the Eastern part of Kentucky that stands for the education of mountain students poor as I am. He tells me of the advantages I shall have at Fishbone College. He brings me a Fishbone catalogue.

I am glad to get it. I take it and read.

It says people wear plain clothes there. It says that no silks are allowed. It says that all boys and girls are entitled to the same chance in this world, and Fishbone gives them this chance. I get interested in a thing that reads like that. It is an adventure. I want to go on this adventure. I ask my brother what he thinks about it—the educated one in our family. He thinks it is fine, he tells me. So I am in a notion to go to Fishbone.

The days pass by. I plow the soil. I hoe the corn. I sow the cane for hay. I plow the potatoes. I cut weeds in the garden. I see that the cattle get fresh water. I use the ax, the plow, the rake, the hoe. I do the work of a man on our hill-side farm. I am a nothing now. But let me speak for my hill country. The hills are covered with green trees, and the wind blows through the tree tops and the leaves flutter. The white clouds float high above. I wish I were a poet now. I wish I could make rhymes like the wind that blows and then throw them to the wind.

This is a pretty rugged country. And I am rugged like my country. I want to step out and do something for it. I want an education,—that is what I want now—that is all I want now. But the water is blue that flows in the mountain streams and there are minnows in this water. There are log-houses in the mountains and old orchards. There are hills covered with blackberry briars and they are in bloom—these old fields are white now. I work and