

I Am a Domestic

A houseworker tells her story. Seven days a week with Thursday afternoons off. "Grant us a small measure of human dignity."

THEY just can't be as bad as they seem to me—these women I have worked for as a domestic. After all, I knew many fine women in various capacities before I was forced, as a penniless widow of forty, to go out to service in order to earn a living for my child and myself.

No, she can't be as bad as she seems, this average woman who hires a maid—so overbearing, so much a slavedriver, so unwilling to grant us even a small measure of human dignity. But I have had three years of experience in at least a dozen households to bear eloquent witness to the contrary.

Of course I am speaking of the average woman. There must be many exceptions. But in my experience the only exception I encountered was a woman whose friends thought her a trifle crazy.

It was true that she employed me by way of astrology—that is, of all the many applicants she figured that my date of birth showed that we would get on well together. I cooked for her one week by astrology and by a color chart the next. That is, our dinner would be entirely purple one day—eggplant, purple cabbage, and beets; and next it would consist of golden corn, yellow squash, carrots, and oranges. And sometimes, poor dear, she would ask me to sit by her bed and talk to her all night to keep her awake because she feared dying in her sleep.

Take this matter of inconsiderateness, of downright selfishness. No other women workers have the slave hours we domestics have. We usually work from twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, except for our pitiful little "Thursday afternoon off." The workday itself is often nerve-racking. Try broiling a steak to a nice turn in the kitchen while a squalling baby in the next room, in need of a dry diaper, tries to protect himself from his brother, aged two, who insists on experimenting on the baby's nose with a hammer. See how your legs can ache after being on them from 7:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m., when you are finishing that last mountain of dishes in the pantry! Know how little you care for that swell dinner you cooked when it comes to you, cold, from the table at 8:00 p.m.

Our wages are pitifully small. I doubt if wages for domestics average higher anywhere than in New York City; and here \$45 a month is good for a "refined woman, good cook, and fond of children." I often wonder just what they mean by "refined." I remember one woman to whom I applied saying: "Say—Wadda ya mean? Usin' better English 'an I do askin' me fer a job! Git out!"

Then there was the old lady in "reduced circumstances" whose sick husband tried to earn a living as a door-to-door drug salesman. I'm sure she could not afford a maid, even a

part time one at \$6 a week. She was unhappy, had little to do, and took it out by standing over me at each little task.

One day I was glad to see she had borrowed a book from a lending library. I thought that now, engrossed in her book, she would leave me alone. Unwisely I said: "I see you are reading ——. I read it last year and enjoyed it." Mrs. S—— looked at me forbiddingly and merely grunted. Later she followed me to the kitchen and whispered: "Naomi, do you read?" I looked at her bewildered. "Read? Why, of course I read!" Then the point of the question dawned on me. I had to laugh. "You mean, Mrs. S——, do I read instead of getting on with my work when you are out? No, I don't do that."

Then there was the grandma in the household of Southern folk, a fat old lady who would call me away from anything I was doing to help her dress. "Naomi, please fasten my garters—I can't reach," or "Tie my shoes—I hate leaning over!" After I had been in that household a week I found the three-year-old calling me "Naomi Noble" instead of my own name. Grandma explained: "Down South we always call our niggers by our own last name, so here we'll call you 'Naomi Noble.'"

These women are so contradictory. They want someone "good with children"; yet when we turn out to be really good—that is, inter-

ested, kindly, and intelligent in our handling of their spoiled offspring—they are likely as not to resent the fact that we have succeeded where they failed. They hate the feeling that a "low" domestic worker can do anything better than they.

It is not only the long hours, the small pay, and the lack of privacy—we often have to share a room with the children—that we maids find hardest to bear. It is being treated most of the time as though we are completely lacking in human dignity and self-respect. During my first year at this work I was continually hopeful. But now I know that when I enter that service elevator I should park my self-respect along with the garbage that clutters it. Self-respect is a luxury I cannot retain and still hold my job. My last one was a good example of this.

As such jobs go, it was a good one. It was "part time." That is, I worked as cook nine instead of the customary twelve to fourteen hours per day. My Sundays were free. My wage was \$40 per month, and I "slept out." After my last ride down with the garbage I could hurry home to the furnished room I shared with my schoolgirl daughter. My employer, Mrs. B——, was the wife of a fashionable doctor. And another person worked with me as a chambermaid. She was a little French girl, new in America, and just learning our language. We two got along splendidly.

Mrs. B——'s apartment was huge. But Lucille and I together kept it immaculate. However, no matter how much we scoured and dusted on hands and knees Mrs. B—— could always find imaginary dust. "Now Naomi," or "Lucille—you know you're lying when you say you cleaned under that settee!" Mrs. B—— was a hypochondriac who drank too much. One day she would be maudlin, the next vindictive. "Now you know I'm no slave-driver and you know there's little work to do around here—why can't you do it *well* instead of just trying to get by?" Or, "What's happened to all that butter I got yesterday?" The idea being that I had stolen some of it. And I would answer respectfully, minutely accounting for the disposal of the butter. We domestics, whatever our background, are supposed to be natural born thieves. "Lucille! You took my box of candy!"

"No, madame!" with a flash of peasant temper, banging open several bureau drawers, "here is your candy where you yourself put it, madame!"

No apology. Why apologize. We needed our jobs, didn't we?

Mrs. B—— was forever giving me orders as to just how many minutes to cook a certain dish—corned beef, for instance! Of course the only way to get around this was to listen respectfully, say: "Yes, Mrs. B——," and then go ahead and cook it as it should be cooked. I had learned early that Mrs. B—— would tolerate no discussion on such matters. That was "talking back" or "impudence." She was always talking about a legendary Negro cook she had once had for six, eight, or ten years (the time varied according to the low or high



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of the whisky bottle) who in all that time had never "answered back."

"Mrs. B—— is the one beeg liar," Lucille would whisper at such times. Lucille, by the way, in learning English, had also acquired some fine cusswords. She enjoyed muttering, when Mrs. B—— had been especially trying: "Son o' de beech! Son o' de beech!"

Healthy Lucille came down with a heavy cold, and finally, after trying to conceal her misery had to go to bed for three days. Mrs. B—— berated her soundly for not having told her. The truth was Lucille knew that when I had been sick for two days my pay had been docked, and she feared the same thing happening to her. While she was ill I did her work as well as my own; but there was no extra pay in my envelope at the end of the month.

When Mrs. B—— had hired me my hours were to be from noon until after dinner. Dinner was to be at seven. But soon dinner was set ahead to seven-thirty and then to eight. Which meant that I did not get through till nine or ten. Mrs. B—— would say: "Now, Naomi, don't rush yourself to have dinner just on the dot—it doesn't matter to us whether it's at eight or eight-thirty. We like to sit around and sip our cocktails."

We dared not say: "But it matters a lot to us whether we finish at eight or ten!"

Lucille and I both met our Waterloo in the following fashion. I had cooked a huge dinner for many guests—we always had company besides the ordinary family of five—and it was 9:00 p.m. before we two sat down to our meal, both too tired to eat.

Suddenly the bell rang furiously and Lucille came back, flushed with anger. "She say to put the cake right on the ice!"

Soon the bell rang again. "Is that cake on the ice?" called out Mrs. B——.

I sang out: "We've just started our dinner, Mrs. B——."

Later I said to Lucille: "Does she think we're horses or dogs that we can eat in five minutes—either a coltie or a Kiltie?" (Kiltie was the dog.) Lucille, who loved such infantile jokes, broke into peals of laughter.

In a second Mrs. B—— was at our side, very angry. She had been eavesdropping in the pantry. "I heard every word you said!"

"Well, Mrs. B——, we're *not* horses or dogs, and we *have* been eating only five minutes!"

"You've been a disturbing influence in this house ever since you've been here!" Mrs. B—— thundered. "Before you came Lucille thought I was a wonderful woman to work for—and tonight you may take your wages and go. Tomorrow, Lucille, your aunt is to come, and we shall see whether you go too!"

I wanted to tell her what I thought of her, but for Lucille's sake I kept quiet. At last at the door I offered my hand to Lucille, saying: "Here is my address."

"I am not interested!" she cried dramatically, throwing the paper to the floor.

I felt suddenly slapped. But from the pleading look in Lucille's eyes, I understood. Mrs. B—— was still in the pantry, and poor Lucille

The Writers Don't Want War

Three hundred explain why they don't want America again to "engage in foreign adventure."

A statement opposing American entry into the European war signed by three hundred writers has been made public by the League of American Writers, of which Donald Ogden Stewart is president. *NEW MASSES* is happy to publish this important document together with a partial list of the signers.

IN this hour of crisis, when the American people are threatened by the disaster of being plunged into a second world war, the League of American Writers calls upon all writers to join in the fight to preserve our peace and democracy.

We consider that peace and democracy are the deepest aspirations of the American people, that if we lose our peace by entering this war abroad we will lose our democracy as well.

We point out that the greatest danger to our peace at this time lies in the possibility that the profound anti-fascist sentiments of the American people will be misused to lead them into war.

We yield to no one in our unalterable hatred and opposition to fascism. We have helped create the genuine anti-fascist spirit of the American people. We maintain, however, that this war in Europe is not one in which the American people should take part for their own good or for the good of Europe's peoples; on the contrary, we maintain that our participation will result only in the prolongation of the war, in the abolition of our own liberties, in the substitution of a tyrannical M-Day control for the rights we cherish, in death lists and purposeless social misery, in cataclysmic depression.

We urge all Americans to combine their strengths, to unite in boldest opposition to the hysteria of the moment, to combat all steps which we know from experience lead directly to war.

In regard to the defense of America, we take our position in the front line of the defenders of our American peace, our American democracy, our American civil liberties, and we will defend these against foreign invaders as we defend them against enemies at home. A defense of seacoasts and towns is incomplete if it does not also defend these American treasures. We insist, therefore, that the military defense program not be made an excuse for attack on social legislation or on the liberties of the people, for if that is done the defense program will be a concealed invasion of precisely the fascist type it proposes to guard us against; and therefore we deplore the

use of a defense program to arouse hysteria under the cover of which attacks have already been made upon the Walsh-Healey act, upon the trade unions and our civil liberties.

It has been said that writers have in their custody the conscience of the world. They do so whenever, with unequivocating courage, they oppose evil. We cry out that our participation in this war could be such an evil. We call upon all writers to act with maximum effort and courage to the end that America shall not again engage in foreign adventure.

(Signed) George Ade, George Albee, Nelson Algren, Katharine Anthony, Benjamin Appel, Harriette Ashbrook, Sanora Babb, Jenny Ballou, Marc Blitzstein, Anita Block, Arna Bontemps, Stirling Bowen, Millen Brand, Dorothy Brewster, Bob Brown, Harriet F. Bunn, Vera Caspary, Harold Clurman, Robert M. Coates, Stanton A. Coblentz, Paul Corey, Harold Coy, Countee Cullen.

H. W. L. Dana, Horace B. Davis, Miriam Allen DeFord, Peter De Vries, Pietro Di Donato, Martha Dodd, William E. Dodd Jr., Muriel Draper, Theodore Dreiser, Robert W. Dunn, Walter Pritchard Eaton, Guy Endore, *Henry Pratt Fairchild, Arthur Huff Fauset, Kenneth Fearing, Harvey Fergusson, Arthur Davison Ficke, Sara Bard Field, Charles J. Finger, Wanda Gag, Laurence Gellert, Marguerite Tjader Harris, Parks Hitchcock, Eugene C. Holmes, Josephine W. Johnson, Alexander Kaun, Grace Kellogg, Rockwell Kent, Jerome Klein, Arthur Kober.

Alfred Kreymborg, David Lamson, John Howard Lawson, Ruth Lechlitrer, Meridel LeSueur, Corliss Lamont, Mary Lapsley, Willard Maas, Albert Maltz, George Marshall, V. J. McGill, Robert M. MacGregor, John T. McIntyre, Ruth McKenney, Loren Miller, Leonard Mins, Eugene O'Brien, Harvey O'Connor, Shaemas O'Sheel, Elizabeth Page, Rebecca Pitts, Alan Porter, D. W. Prall, John Hyde Preston, Phelps Putnam, Samuel Putnam, Charles Recht, W. L. River, Holland D. Roberts, Anna Rochester, Wellington Roe, Ralph Roeder, William Rollins Jr., Harold J. Rome, Norman Rosten, Henry Roth, Muriel Rukeyser, Isidor Schneider.

George Seldes, Irwin Shaw, Viola Brothers Shore, Ernest J. Simmons, Tess Slesinger, Frank Smith, Wessel Smither, Isobel Walker Soule, Sigmund Spaeth, Arthur Steig, Jessica Smith, Philip Stevenson, Donald Ogden Stewart, Paul Strand, Deems Taylor, Jim Tully, Jean Starr Untermeyer, Joseph Vogel, Keene Wallis, J. Raymond Walsh, Eda Lou Walton, Harold Ward, Alice Holdship Ware, Clara Weatherwax, Paul Weiss, William Carlos Williams, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Richard Wright, Victor A. Yakhontoff, Art Young, Dalton Trumbo.

* Endorsed the statement, but with minor reservations.

was thinking of her stern French aunt and that she would get no references after ten months' work.

They have us there! For a petty whim they can withhold that precious bit of paper without which it is hard for us to obtain another ticket to slavery. I knew, in my case, I would

never get a reference from Mrs. B——. So I did not ask for one, but rode on down for the last time with the garbage.

Jobless, and with only \$15 between us and starvation, I still felt a wild sense of joy. For just a few days I should be free and self-respecting!

NAOMI WARD.