

THE GENERAL HOUSEWORK EMPLOYEE

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WITHIN their own intimate household relations many women have the situation of employer and employee, the responsibility of hours, wages, and sanitary conditions, with the consequent opportunity of expressing the ethical ideals of business which are demanded of employers in factory and shop. Home-makers should realize that as employers they are in competition with factory and store, and that there must be some reason why these industries have plenty of workers, while the demand for household employees is always greater than the supply, and the supply often incapable and inadequate for the duties required.

Since the problem of household labor is so individual, so separated from the large consideration of public opinion, it is still looked upon as a personal business, and the right to enter into the solution of household labor is considered by home-makers to belong only to individual mistresses, each in her individual requirements of daily living. Women should profit by the experience in the industrial situation at large, where individual conception of management has had to give way to larger democratic principles of capital and labor, and thus be ready to understand the true significance of the present discontent of household employees.

A home-maker confronted with this problem of household industry has attempted, and is practically developing, a plan of domestic labor along democratic lines, and the writer wishes to present the attempt of this employer as a means immediately practicable for bringing household labor into line with some of the best principles of modern industry.

The family consists of four members, two children, father, and mother. Like the majority of families employing domestic labor, this has but one housework employee, the long-suffering "general

housework girl." Since the employer in question believes that the care of children must be considered as a special feature of home life, and under no conditions be added to the day's work of the general housework employee, a trained person is employed a definite number of hours a day to assist in the care of the children. If a family cannot afford this added expense, however, it seems that upon the mother must fall the entire charge of her children.

The problem, therefore, in this household becomes chiefly that of the general housework employee, of whom much is required, and to whom, usually, little is given. We may start with the conviction that since household labor should be conducted on a business basis, living conditions, hours, and wages must be considered in this relation. First, then, the employee and her life must be in harmony with the best democratic principles of the modern business world; the household worker must be independent; must live her own life outside of working hours; live in her own home or proper lodgings, and go daily to her place of work, as all other working men and women outside of domestic employment go to theirs. She must have her own friends, her own social life, her own disposition of leisure, untrammelled by the wish of an employer, who usually bestows freedom upon the household worker as a privilege and not as a right.

Employers of domestic labor may assert that the morals of the girls living outside the household will be endangered; that girls living in the employer's household have much more protection than if they lived outside; that their social life can be guarded and guided by the wise and kind supervision of their interested employers, their hours of leisure properly directed along useful and developing lines. But Miss Addams has pointed out in the chapter on "Household Adjustment" in "Democ-

racy and Social Ethics" that statistics from certain hospitals in London show "that seventy-eight per cent of illegitimate children born there are the children of girls working in households." She has suggested that no individual employer, acquainted imperfectly with the personal life of her employee, need think her influence for good on the working-girl's life so strong or beneficial as the standards of morality of the girl's own family and social standing.

Women are interested in working-girls' homes and clubs, under proper management, for factory and store employees; then why draw the line at domestic employees? Have they not the same right to good living conditions on a democratic basis? Why build houses with a wing generously thrown out for servants, there not only to work, but to live, under constant supervision, and at the personal pleasure of the employer? Rather enter into the larger effort of providing homes properly built and cared for, of supplying healthful amusement, greater opportunities for development of character for all workers in all fields of industry, including that of household labor, and so be in touch with an uplift for all in a democratic spirit, rather than a betterment on individual lines for a separated class. This broadening of the aspect of domestic labor will bring into active work for improving in general the conditions of working-girls many employers whose imaginations were not keen enough, before the problem faced them in their own homes, to be actively interested in the lives of the great band of workingwomen.

Under such an employer's plan the sanitary conditions of the home of the employee are known and considered by the employer before accepting the employee as worker in her home, and afterwards, by keeping in close touch with the girl's home life, the employer guards against the very real danger of the transmission of disease. A room set apart for dressing is provided in the employer's house, in which the employee on arriving exchanges her street clothes for the wash-dresses and aprons which are washed, ironed, and kept in the home of her employer. How many employers on the

present basis of household labor know the houses into which their workers go on days and evenings off, and from which they return to sleep in the employer's home, where the danger of infection to the household is aggravated by the presence of all the employee's belongings? Such a demand, and the careful inspection on the part of employers which prevails under the proposed plan, would improve sanitary conditions in the districts from which the domestic employees are drawn, and would force even the most individualistic home-makers into touch with the larger questions of village and city sanitation.

Next, this employer believes that the employee must have a normal working day, definite hours of work and definite hours of leisure. The employee is on duty at 7 in the morning until 1:30 P.M., off duty until 5, then on from 5 to 8. This schedule is for every day except Thursdays and Sundays. On Thursday she is on duty from 7 to 1:30—Sundays 8:30 to 3. Counting two hours and a half a week for her to wash and iron her own clothes, this brings the week down to fifty-eight working hours, the normal week required by law for women working in all mercantile establishments.

Many home-makers declare that their employees have hours off every afternoon and evening, but in the majority of cases they are required to stay in the employers' houses, and "Oh, yes," say the conscientious home-makers, "just answer the door-bell and telephone." Unless the employee is permitted to stop her work at a given hour to go out, or to stay in the house if preferred, and is absolutely off call of the employer, the worker is not in effect at liberty. If an employer in a factory or shop required his men to stay at their place of work after hours, though asking no arduous duty of them, such demand, in the opinion of the public, would be unjustifiable.

How can the work usually required of a general housework girl be accomplished in the given time? First, by careful direction on the part of the employer, who must understand exactly the demands she makes of the worker and who can train the employee into wise use of

her time, into directed, concentrated effort instead of the indefinite, wasted time of the poor, confused "general housework girl." Then by eliminating unnecessary labor; by the conviction that home comforts and peace do not depend upon a white-aproned individual answering every bell whether occupied in attic or cellar—that daintily served meals are not dependent upon the minute and detailed service of a person who has already done more than a normal day's work—in short, an employer must not expect specialized work from an unspecialized worker.

The employer in question eliminates the need at table of personal service on the part of the employee by adopting the invention of a friend for serving meals. It is a piece of furniture the height of the dining-table, with ends and back inclosed, and consisting of four shelves, counting the top. It stands at the side of the hostess with the open front toward her, and into this serving-table are put the different courses of the meal, which are entirely out of sight of the guests. One shelf is reserved empty for the soiled plates of the first course. Meals are served in this way daintily and attractively and without any confusion when the home-maker has grasped the simple art of combining the tact of a hostess with the skill of serving. The device also removes the presence of an alien person from the gathering of a family and its friends, a condition which from the point of view of many employees must be trying, and to some employers, confronted with strong democratic tendencies of living, an incongruity to be avoided if possible. After the meal is over and the family has left the table, the employee is able to put the entire remains of the meal into this serving-table, which on casters can be wheeled out to the butler's pantry or kitchen. This small detail saves the customary labor of carrying out gradually the dishes, and is one of the practical means of reducing the time usually required for the many details of service.

Food is demanded well cooked and attentively prepared, cleaning of house thoroughly done, washing and ironing of only the family's personal clothing,

while the other household washing is sent to a public laundry which the employer has visited, and the conditions of which she has found modern and scientific.

Gas is exclusively used for cooking, and, after careful planning of the employer and intelligent training of the employee, the home-maker has been able to bring the gas bills for cooking to an average below the cost of coal formerly used for this service. Furthermore, the use of gas eliminates the labor expended on the carrying of coal and ashes, and lessens the work of keeping the kitchen free from dust and dirt.

Since this employer believes that bread-making, like laundry work, is capable of being handled in a centralized way with large equipment, and that by the removal of this product from individual households one more detail of labor can be avoided, she buys the bread for her family; knowing that only by the demand of the intelligent will the standard of a product be raised. Therefore she has investigated the bakery and the process of handling the bread from baker to consumer, and is a regular customer where the conditions of production and distribution are proper, so helping the permanence of such a bakery and making it possible for other home-makers to procure the ideal product.

The next consideration is the standard of wages, a thing so without any special status in domestic employment to day that it is a difficult matter for individual employers to settle. Miss Salmon has made the statement in her valuable and scientific study entitled "Domestic Service" that "the wages received in domestic service are relatively and sometimes absolutely higher than the average wages received in other wage-earning occupations open to women." This high remuneration in wages in domestic labor is due, no doubt, to the present difficulty of obtaining workers, this difficulty being mainly due, in all probability, to the indefinite arrangements of domestic labor and the social disadvantages of the work on the long-established basis.

The employer described has taken for