

## THE EXPERIENCES OF A "HIRED GIRL"

The articles which have recently been appearing in *The Outlook* on housekeeping as a business have brought to us, among many other letters, the following from a woman who is at the present time employed in domestic service in Chicago. It is a human document of such interest and such suggestiveness that we print it, not as a mere letter, but as a useful contribution to the literature of "Domestic Science." The author does not wish her name to be made public, but we may assure our readers that she is a real person, and that what she has to say is based upon actual experience. There are thousands of homes in which the domestic helpers are treated with more consideration and with more intelligence than the writer of this letter has met in much of her work; but there are also, we are convinced, thousands of homes in which her suggestion as to "scientific management" of the kitchen ought to be taken with serious and sympathetic consideration.—THE EDITORS.

THERE has been so much written about the "hired girl" question from the side of the "lady of the house" that perhaps it would be just as well to look on the other side of the shield.

I have worked in private families since I was sixteen, and next year I will be fifty years old, so I know the answer thoroughly. If the housewives would apply some sort of business system to the conduct of their housekeeping, the answer would be simple. But no; any time, anything to work with, and any old way is their rule. Their most common phrase is: "That is my business; this is my house." If anything goes wrong, their first word is: "You will walk out of this house this minute, or I will get a man to put you out." In one place I asked for a clean roller-towel for the kitchen. I did not get it, and so washed the one that was on the roller. The lady then told me I was trying to run the house.

If ladies would really have a system about their housework and would come out

at night after supper, or, better, at nine o'clock in the morning, and write out the order of the next three meals—luncheon, evening dinner, and the next morning's breakfast—then the maid would have that order too, and there would not be so many mistakes from forgetfulness, and so forth, and the mistress would know just what she would have to order from the grocer and would make out her grocery order accordingly. But not one lady in a hundred does that sensible thing.

Most of the middle-class well-to-do people that pay girls five and six dollars a week come out in the kitchen after supper and say: "We will have pancakes for breakfast. What! Not enough milk? And no eggs? Then we will have biscuits. Give the one egg to Mr. Blank in the morning with coffee and an orange for fruit. The children can have cornflakes." Perhaps the lady goes downtown in the morning, has her own nice lunch at a restaurant, and tells me I can give the children a pick-up lunch, and I am lucky

if I have enough in the pantry to give them fried bread, which is known as "French toast." When three or four children come home from school hungry as bears, they always enjoy anything they can eat with sugar or syrup, like "French toast" or pancakes or waffles.

Then, again, there are not enough tools to work with. Perhaps there is an old worn-out can-opener or none at all, knives that are not sharp, no sleeve-board for ironing—little necessary things that could be bought at the ten-cent store. When I ask if I can have a new one, the answer is: "Well, we [the family] have used that one" or "done without it," as the case may be, "for the last forty years, and I guess you can make it do for the little while you are here."

Then, again, would it be showing the girl too much consideration to let her have a sewing-machine in her room? They often have an old one in the basement that could be repaired as well as not. If there is any kind of an old rocking-chair that they can't possibly use anywhere else in the house, they stick it in the girl's room; and often every other part of the house is heated well, but the girl's room is so cold she can't sew or read in it.

And the girl could enjoy her warm meal if they would serve her plate when they serve the family, as they do for a hired man or a laundress who comes in by the day. Many times there is not enough in the house for lunch. One lady I worked for lived in the fourth-floor flat. I had been doing the laundry work in the basement. I came up at half-past four—no dishes washed, supper to get, and no groceries ordered yet. She gave the order, "We will have baked bananas and fried apples," and a raft of other stuff that it would take too long to cook and get ready in time. This was unreasonable. Well, there was fine soup all ready, and apple sauce, and I boiled some potatoes and prepared some cold meat. But she said afterwards that I had not obeyed, and she "must have discipline." A maid should know what she is expected to get for supper by 11 A.M. at the latest under ordinary circumstances.

Then, again, if a girl could work under a legal contract agreement, say, from three to six months, it would improve conditions immensely. The girl would know she had a good permanent home and steady work, and the lady would know that she had a contract

agreement that she could depend upon. The leisure time of the girl should be fixed in this contract. There is often no Sunday out until after four and no evening out until after eight. Foreign girls do not go into housework for this reason. They prefer the fixed hours of factory and shop work.

Ladies are sometimes not honest in money matters concerning the girls they employ. I have known many nice girls to work for little money—two dollars and a half or three dollars a week—and one week out of every five or six the lady would forget, or pretend to forget, to pay for. If the girl has given no written receipt for her wages, she sometimes has no proof of what is due her. A girl should give a written receipt for the time and amount every time the lady pays her, and the payments should be made regularly on a fixed date, just as they are in shops, factories, and offices. The girls that keep their places in housework are frequently the ones that do not ask to go out except at their ladies' convenience, or for any money until the lady gets ready to hand it to them, and they do without many things that they need to work with if they are going to do good work. As it is now, without a written contract, a lady can come out into the kitchen after supper and say, "I think you had better go to-night, you can leave the dishes if you want to," without an hour's notice, and it may be raining pitchforks, and no reason is given.

A girl may like children very much, but children in the kitchen tend to make a girl nervous and forget her work and make mistakes. In many ways it is dangerous for children to be in the kitchen, for accidents may happen to them with boiling water and hot grease when one is hurried in her work.

Mistresses often give a girl more work than she can do in a day. They will not hire the washing done if they can get the girl to do it. They say, "Really, if the girl does not do the washing, I would not have anything for her to do." If a girl does not do the washing they do not want to pay over two or three dollars a week, and a girl cannot live on that amount. Ladies sometimes feed meat to their dogs or pet cats in the dining-room when there is not enough meat for the girls in the kitchen. If there are two girls, they should each have a separate bed, which is not always the case.

If the mistress of the house would only write out the work of the week, day by day,

would put down on paper the work required, certain work for certain days, would treat housework like a business, and treat their maids like the employees of a business, many of the problems of domestic service would be solved.

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