

Our Feudal Housewives

BY EVELYN SEELEY

THE housewife stands condemned as the worst employer in the country. She is worse than Girdler, Rand, the runaway factory owner, the manufacturer with a string of sweatshops; at best she ranks with Henry Ford, paternalist, without his scientific efficiency.

Civilization has progressed through three stages in labor relationships, as has been pointed out by Henrietta Roelofs of the Young Women's Christian Association—owner and slave, master and man, employer and employee. The housewife is still back in the master-and-man—or mistress-and-maid—era. "The slave had no independent life of his own," Miss Roelofs says, "no free time of his own, and therefore no social standing. In the relation of mistress and maid there is an advance in that either party is at liberty to terminate the relationship if unsatisfactory; but the mistress still feels that she owns the entire time of the maid once the relationship is established, and the granting of free periods of time to the maid partakes of the nature of a generous gift."

As employers housewives belong to one of three classes—rich mistresses of large houses, middle-class suburbanites, and women who work for their living or to supplement their husband's income. The wealthy group is the best, the middle-class group the worst. The wealthy woman with a staff of servants may be at least a benevolent despot; the suburban wife, straining to keep up with the Joneses, uses her maid to that end; the working employer may not know, or take time to learn, how much work can be done in her house in a certain time.

The housewives of the United States make their million and a half employees work an average of seventy-two hours a week and pay them lower wages than are paid in any other industry. (Comparatively good wages, \$8 to \$18 a week, are maintained in some metropolitan areas, but in most sections they average only \$3 and \$4 a week.) Housewives pay their servants whatever they can squeeze out of their budget after the grocer, the butcher, the laundry, the department store—with means of collection—have been paid; cut them when their own income declines; take from their pay maximum cash value for living quarters and give them minimum value—a room just off the laundry, perhaps, or over the garage; give them no vacations with pay, no sick leave, no insurance against accident, no security of any kind; permit them little freedom to see or make friends; treat them generally in such a way that a social stigma clings to the job of domestic worker.

At the bottom of the worker scale is the "slave market" as it exists in certain cities. New York has 200 slave markets, according to the Domestic Workers' Union. You can bargain for household help in the Bronx on almost any corner above 167th Street. Colored workers, mostly women, stand there in little groups waiting to be hired. Each carries a bundle containing work clothes and the lunch she will eat hastily on her own time. They work for 35 cents an hour, although 50 cents is the standard rate. Some who are desperate or cold or tired of standing will work for 25. They say that they are sometimes asked to go for 15. Most jobs last three or four hours.

That is the bottom. At the top are the domestic staffs of the big houses, who in many cases have reasonable hours, good pay, security, and some social life among themselves. Between the "cleaning women" and the "staff" come the great majority of domestic workers—those who are the only maid in a home, completely at the mercy of the kindness or carelessness or ruthlessness of the employer. The conditions of their employment are admittedly difficult to change, but certain movements, gathering strength slowly, are under way to help them. Legislation, unionization, training for workers, education of employers, promotion of the working agreement offer hope for the future.

More women are in domestic service in the United States than in any other kind of employment, yet only one state out of forty-three—Washington—makes its limitation of hours for women in industry applicable to domestic workers. Only three states—New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut—place household employees under the workmen's compensation laws, and Connecticut only if there are four employees working for one employer. New York considers domestics eligible for unemployment insurance only if there are four workers in a house. Wisconsin includes them in the minimum-wage law.

A year ago a bill limiting the hours of domestic work to sixty a week was introduced in the New York legislature. Placing the limit as high as sixty would seem arrogant in any other field, but the home is "different," and to many sputtering housewives, as well as to the domestic-employment agencies, the very idea was revolution. The Women's Trade Union League framed the bill. Such organizations as the Domestic Workers' Union, the National Consumers' League, the Women's City Club of New York, and the League of Women Shoppers gener-

ally favored it. The W. T. U. L. had heard many protests that the introduction of the bill was premature, that education for housewives on the subject was needed first, but it had not realized what a hornet's nest it was tackling. At a meeting held at the clubrooms of a civic-minded urban group the audience appeared unable to distinguish between legislation and unionization. The argument of the head of the Domestic Workers' Union, who spoke for the bill, was a red flag to her listeners. When she had finished, they exploded: "I've kept house twenty-five years, but I'll move to a hotel before I'll stand for it"—"We'll close our homes; we'll quit having children"—"My husband has enough troubles with unions in his business without having union trouble at home."

Assemblyman Muccigrosso introduced the bill in committee in Albany. Knocked down, it rose for resubmission so weak and shorn that the union could no longer support it. And even in that weak and toothless state it could not be passed. The only thing accomplished for household workers in New York during the past year was the amendment of the workmen's compensation act to apply to employers of two or more household workers.

Washington passed its sixty-hour law a year ago against tremendous pressure. Proponents of the bill had to shear off the six-day week and the \$50 fine for violation and make its provisions practically unenforceable in order to get it through at all. Since its passage many housewives have been found to be "non-cooperative." They interpret free hours as hours when the maid is on call to answer telephone and door bell, or even as hours of light duties. Violation of the act, a misdemeanor, has to be reported by the maid. And naturally not many maids who want to hold their jobs report their employers. Some employers take the attitude that if an employee "doesn't like the standards of work her best move is to find another employer."

The Domestic Workers' Union is young and weak. In New York, where there are 100,000 domestic workers, it has not yet 1,000 members. There are unions in Westchester County, a suburban section near New York, Washington, D. C., Milwaukee, Chicago, Philadelphia, Oakland, Newark, and Cleveland, but most of them are small, and only a few are real unions; several have A. F. of L. charters and one a C. I. O. charter. The New York local strives for the sixty-hour six-day week, one full day off, higher wages, better conditions, social security and compensation. The union does not regard sixty hours as a reasonable working week, but it knows it is the best it can ask for now. It suggests working out the sixty-hour six-day week on the basis of two five-hour shifts a day. A ten-hour day seems a great stride ahead, since the average maid works fifteen to sixteen hours a day.

All persons interested in obtaining better conditions for domestic workers agree that education is essential, and this means education for workers and employers alike.

The National Consumer's League, which is about to undertake a survey of the whole problem, believes that such education must precede legislation. The National Committee of Household Workers is committed to "recognition of housework as employment requiring skill and training and the establishment, through public-school systems where possible, of vocational training schools for houseworkers where they can be taught to schedule their work to fit into a normal work day." All over the country special schools are offering domestic training as a way to better standards. In most states the WPA is conducting household projects for those on relief who want to go into household work.

At the Philadelphia Institute of Household Occupations students ranging in age from seventeen to thirty study in a nine-room rented house, an actual home situation. The school board provides the teaching service, and the Y. W. C. A. pays the director's salary, furnishings, and overhead. Students with at least an eighth-grade education are preferred. They must be strong enough for housework, free from infectious disease, interested in housework, reasonably attractive. They study for three months—general cleaning, laundering, cooking and caring for food, service, child care, personal regimen, work attitudes. Graduates of the institute who "live out" are placed on the basis of a forty-eight-hour week, those who "live in" on a fifty-four-hour week. The school is willing to help employers to map out the work and checks the efficiency and welfare of the maid at the end of the first week, the first month, and after that every three months. The catch is that even the trained maid, knowing standards and schedules as well as her personal rights, is at the mercy of the individual housewife. The schools have no means of insisting on minimum standards from employers, for there is neither legislation nor public opinion to support them.

Educating the housewife employer is another matter. This is one of the jobs of Dorothy P. Wells, chairman of the National Committee on Household Employment, one of the best-versed and most realistic women in the field of domestic employer-employee relations. She is urging, through local councils on household employment, the general use of the working agreement. This is an agreement, made at the time of hiring, which defines duties, actual working hours, time on call, free hours, time off, vacations, wages. It may be written or oral and may be reviewed periodically if emergencies or unforeseen variations occur.

Mrs. Boardman of Scientific Housekeeping, who opposed the sixty-hour bill, believes that labor laws will solve nothing "when such demands as a sixty-hour week meet the resistance from housewives which this bill is meeting and must legitimately meet." "Let us educate household employers to their responsibility . . . as to regularity of outlines of work, time off duty, systematic

ordering and entertaining, adequate equipment, nourishing food for maids, and constant developing of a maid's ability, responsibility, and intelligence. These are essential to maintain the household morale that makes life at home a complete joy for all concerned." Mrs. Boardman calls this "the new morale," and asserts that it "remains at all times the simple and complete solution."

Miss Wells often feels a bit grim about finding a solution. One hope seems to her to lie in training potential young employers in college. "Maybe," she says hopefully, "if you get them young—"

Is the Passementerie Pact Doomed?

BY FRANK SULLIVAN

IN SOME respects the world seems calmer but in others not so calm. Leslie Hore-Belisha, British Secretary of State for War, aroused mirth when he announced recently that he believes in mermaids, but nobody laughed when Chamberlain announced that he believes in Mussolini. Of course, the British are notoriously slow to catch the point of some types of joke.

In New York, James Woodhull wrote the President asking Mr. Roosevelt to drop everything and find him a wife. James apparently does not want to get married in a hurry or he does not read the papers. Doesn't he know that if Mr. Roosevelt were to pick a bride for him, her name would have to be submitted to Congress for confirmation, and the moment that happened, Representative John J. O'Connor, the greatest champion of the people's liberties since Father Coughlin, Jeremiah Cross, and Donald Duck, would rise in his wrath and send himself three thousand night letters demanding that Woodhull be preserved from the perils of dictatorship?

Somewhat more disturbing is the news about Mrs. T. Wallace Orr. Mrs. T. Wallace Orr purchased an emerald at a reported cost of a quarter of a million dollars. Probably felt blue and out of sorts one day and just went out and bought the kickshaw to cheer herself up. It weighs sixty-five carats and belonged to a maharajah for whom it had got too small.

Now, those lovers of peace and amity who have a tendency to sneeze in the presence of strong light can only hope that this purchase by Mrs. Orr will not upset the 5-5-5 Passementerie Pact of 1935 by which Countess Babs Hutton, Mrs. Edward B. McLean, owner of the Hope diamond, and Mae West, owner of the West (and also East) stomacher, agreed to limit the size of their diadems.

No statements have come from Miss West, Mrs. McLean, or the Countess regarding Mrs. Orr's acquisition, and we political experts, knowing the mettle of these three girls, cannot fail to construe their silence as omi-

nous. In our opinion it is extremely likely that the three parties to the Passementerie Pact will regard Mrs. Orr's purchase as an unfriendly gesture, and unless someone intervenes who can speak with authority, such as Elsa Maxwell, and prevail on Mrs. Orr to take a hammer and break up her emerald into twenty or thirty smaller gems that will not threaten the balance of power already existing between La West, La McLean, and La Comtesse, we are undoubtedly in for a gem race that may well exhaust all the participants.

The strain of wearing heavy jewelry is an ordeal which is not always appreciated by the non-jewel-possessing classes, and society women who with no thought to their own comfort endeavor to bring a little sunshine into the lives of night-club waiters by displaying several pounds of precious gems often get no thanks at all for their pains, not even from the hold-up men who are the greatest beneficiaries of their thoughtfulness.

In our opinion, Miss West, Mrs. McLean, and Babs are in better shape for the coming emerald fight than Mrs. T. Wallace Orr, although I must admit I do not know much about Mrs. T. Wallace Orr and have no data at hand regarding her past performances as a jewel toter. However, I have seen her photograph, and she seems like a rather frail girl, scarcely strong enough to lift a quarter of a million dollars in cash, let alone a sixty-five-carat emerald.

The other three girls are experienced gem wearers who know exactly how to carry a diamond of the boulder type with the least expenditure of energy. All three, I understand from the managers of the safe-deposit vaults which handle their equipment, are in the pink today and would emerge from the most strenuous gem-wearing contest with scarcely more than a pain in the neck. Mrs. McLean, of course, will be particularly remembered for her courageous diamond-wearing feat of some years back when she went to Russia and flashed the Hope diamond on the Russians, frightening the mujiks into a proper appreciation of America's up-to-the-minute equipment in anti-aircraft searchlights.

Of course, Mrs. Orr may turn out to be a dark horse. There was a rumor that she is being coached by Peggy Joyce, but I have not been able to contact Miss Joyce to verify this. But if it is true, the parties to the Passementerie Pact had better look to their laurels, for Peggy Joyce is a force to be reckoned with as a diamond toter. Miss Joyce has done more for the diamond than Luther Burbank did for the potato, and when she really puts on all her ice, she causes magnetic storms on the surface of the sun, ninety-six millions of miles away. And she still holds the record for the twenty-pound-ruby put.

It will be interesting to see what happens as a result of Mrs. Orr's deft. At any rate, lovers of justice will have the satisfaction of knowing that no matter what happens, Cartier will win.

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