

THE SERVANT GIRL PROBLEM.

A well-known writer has said that "the future of our American home-life depends on the servant girl question." If this be true, the subject is one of vital importance and worthy of the most serious and careful discussion; it is a social problem of as great moment as are those of Tammany, or of the Chinese-Japanese question; it can no more be a minor issue than are the ballot, the land tax, or the currency—in short, if the State is founded on the home, then the consideration of the welfare and happiness of the latter is necessarily of no less consequence than a study and discussion of the former.

Another reason which perhaps emphasizes the importance of this problem is its antiquity; it is doubtful if there can be found any great social question which antedates that of the servant girl question. We have an authentic account of trouble between mistress and maid as far back as Abraham's time, when Sarah expelled from her home the bondswoman Hagar.

In very early times, the unnatural rulers were the physically strong, the weaker ones, slaves; for protection the less fortunate united themselves to the mighty ones and the result was slavery. The lords granted protection, sometimes furnished food and clothing, and the right over the slave extended "even to life." This bondage continued even down to our own generation, and was broken only by revolution.

We are but creatures of habit; old ideas and traditions cling to us and are difficult to shake off. We still find the strong and weak, master and man, mistress and maid, but today the question is one of mental not physical superiority. The fact still remains of two distinct classes, the ruler and the ruled, between whom there exists a mutual antagonism.

In the old countries, France, England, Germany and other European nations, the birthplace of feudalism, servants still may be found and although republican ideas and influences of late years have had their effect, domestic service is comparatively good. But in free America where every man is presumably the peer of his neighbor, the service is vile.

It is not our purpose to write of the few grand homes of America, like that of Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt, where forty or fifty servants (mostly English) are employed, very few of whom my lady ever sees; for she delegates the care of the household to a housekeeper who superintends everything, and all is carried on as in the English homes of royalty. We are to treat of the characteristic American home, where but one girl is employed. The American woman of moderate circumstances, the wife and mother of such a home, is a being the least to be envied; to say that her duties are onerous, is stating the case mildly; she must be responsible for a home the perfection of neatness, care for the children, do the family sewing, be a member of two or more clubs or societies, attend parties and in turn entertain, always be prepared to receive, and ready to take part in this or that charitable enterprise. She must have assistance in the household work—at least one help. There are two reasons for not having more—firstly, she can afford no more; secondly, she can tolerate no more.

It is proverbial that in America the

servant girl receives the highest wages, has her personal rights the least interfered with, is granted more privileges and in return gives poorer service than anywhere else. It is too well known to be controverted that the mistress must see the girl, offer her great inducements, be prompt in paying wages, give her the best the house affords to eat—a thing unheard of in Europe—very often spend weeks in teaching her how to work while at a moment's notice, with baby ill, the weekly washing in progress, the girl may demand her wages and quit.

Who has not heard remarks like the following? "I'd rather do my own work than be worried with a hired girl," or "We shall be forced to break up house-keeping and go to boarding; one-half the time I'm without help and the other half I am so badly served that I am little better off." Let us quote the actual words of a lady of this city who has had at least fifteen years' experience in housekeeping with "hired help." This lady is kind-hearted, thoughtful and intelligent. "What is my opinion of the average hired girl? I consider them an ungrateful, ignorant, conscienceless, dish breaking, relation-feeding lot, whose wages are the smallest part of their expense."

And what says the servant girl? Her defense may be summed up in these words: "We are looked upon as a class of inferiors and treated as such." She feels that she has no companionship in the home, is tolerated there only for the reason that she performs menial work that is beneath the ladies of the house. She perceives full well that domestic labor has been degraded; she has no respect for it herself, and consequently takes no pride in its performance. With her it is no labor of love, but a mere question of business, a giving of services for the most that can be got for them, and therefore she has no scruples at quitting one mistress if she can do better elsewhere. She is not blind. Has she not seen that my lady does not hesitate at contemptible means for securing the services of girls? If not strictly moral, she will most likely seize the many opportunities offered for cheating her employer, and if honest, feeling that non-exercise sympathy in her behalf, she fails to see the necessity of looking to the interests of her mistress and is neglectful if not maliciously wasteful. Added to all this are her republican ideas of equality which makes the American servant girl cold, calculating and "stuck up," and red-armed Biddy just over from Ireland, who does not know a meat-broiler from a warming pan; with vague notions of being "as good as missus" becomes intolerably insolent.

Here is a strange complexity of affairs: the home-life of the American people seriously interfered with on account of our republican spirit. For example, we go out on the 4th of July, shout ourselves hoarse singing the Star Spangled Banner, thrill with patriotic pride at the words of the orator beginning, "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary," etc. Still burning with patriotism we return home and find that Polly, partaking of the general feeling of independence, has taken french leave. The house is open and either Polly or some ruthless burglar has carried off a hundred dollars worth of jewelry. We prepare our own dinner or go without any, and silently ponder on the working results of the Declaration of Indepen-

dence, universal suffrage and unrestricted immigration.

A study of human nature will demonstrate that we can not have perfect service in a republic, but through a general uprooting of old ideas and an overturning of time-honored customs, the present service can probably be improved. The old family servant is a thing of the past; the help of the present and future is a totally different being. She is no longer an inferior member of the household—that is, she is a tradition and must be relegated to the past, however displeasing it may be. We see in this, too, a shade of sadness for the servant; for with all her glorious personal liberty it destroys forever that feeling of regarding herself as a part of the house. This, however, is but a side issue, and of little moment as compared with "liberty, fraternity, equality."

Some thinkers on the servant girl problem, and their number is steadily increasing, advocate the co-operative plan; that is, to have all food prepared in public kitchens, to have sweeping, dusting, general house-keeping performed by specialized labor. This plan would do away with the regular servant in the home. It may be the future solution of the question, but at present to carry it out completely seems impracticable. However, much of our household labor could be and is performed by specialized laborers to great advantage, as bread-making, laundry work and weekly house cleaning.

If we must have servants in our homes, and it is doubtful if we can do otherwise, let domestic labor be elevated. As one lady remarks, "Make the work respectable by employing none but respectable people." It is here worthy of notice, that the present hard times which have forced so many women to perform the household duties without outside help, should certainly tend to the elevation of such labor, on the theory that work is estimated by the quality of the workmen.

That kitchen work may be looked upon as an honorable means to livelihood, training schools are suggested where women and girls may be taught, not only house-work, but principles of economy and moral obligations. When domestic labor is really regarded with the same respect as store and factory work, sewing, nursing, etc., it will attract intelligent girls, for it is better paid for than any other manual work for women. It is far more varied and healthful than are standing all day in a store, sitting for hours at a sewing machine, perspiring daily in a laundry, or breathing the foul air of the factory.

Let family work be authoritatively and publicly placed on a strictly commercial basis. It is obviously impossible to lay out a set of rules for governing employer and employee, for household matters in different homes widely vary; but when a servant girl is engaged, let there be a written contract with wages specified, duties and hours clearly defined, if possible, make yearly engagements, for long service is necessary to good service. In this way, how can controversy arise between lady and maid. Under present conditions, ladies have no right to interfere in any way whatever with the personal liberty of the help outside of working hours; her "free" hours are her own in which to do as she pleases. If at any time advice seems needed concerning her conduct,