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THE HOUSEWORK BOYCOTT

The "man-made" work of our factories and shops is often quite as cruel as the women who study and criticise it claim. However, the ironical fact remains that the working girl prefers it to the woman-made work of the household. They flock to loom and spinning frame, to mangel and counter, to feeding machines and pounding typewriters - anything rather than to the positions woman offer in their homes. Why is this so? What is back of this country-wide, unorganized and half unconscious boycott of the oldest and the most important service in the world - that of helping to run the home, the unit on which society is based?

The boycott itself is not more difficult to explain than the practical unanimity with which the great organized bodies of women shun the subject. They conduct factory and department store investigations, devise laws for their control and schemes for their improvement - that is a man struggling with his labor problem can if he will get today from various organizations of woman valuable suggestions and illumination on his labor problem. A woman can get little or no help on her labor problem from anybody.

It was a sense of this anomoly that led the National Board of the Young Womans Christian Association some eighteen months ago to appoint a commission on Household Employment. The association is probably the largest goup of organized women in the country. It is non-sectarian. It would like to be both Christian and democratic. It felt deeply that there was something at work in the problem of Household Employment which was neither. Could it get at this?

What was the problem? Who had stated it clearly and authoritively? Search as it would and did the Commission found no satisfactory statement, no sufficient analysis, only a hugh vague discontent where each side took refuge in more or less bitter criticism of the other. The one certain thing was that the demand for houseworkers was far greater than the supply and that the supply generally was

untrained and unhappy. What ailed the work that girls shunned it? It seemed logical to ask the girls. Fortunately the Association was in excellent state to do this - clubs of girls from factories, shops and households having been organized in recent years in various parts of the country. To a selected set of these clubs a questionnaire was sent. The burden of its inquiries was what are the advantages and disadvantages of housework as compared with factory and shop work. If anybody has an idea that girls do not think at all on the matter but blindly follow an impulse or a crowd he must reconstruct his opinion. Answers were received from 299 girls - 112 of whom were in household positions. They were surprisingly candid, interesting and thoughtful. They show that the girls know perfectly why they refuse housework - and why accepting it they are so often unhappy. They are equally frank in admitting its advantages as compared with business. They believe it to pay better Heat, room rent, board and light must all come out of the factory girls pay - she decides she has less left, In fact, the averages struck by the commission from the information submitted seem to show that she has little more than half as much money in hand at the end of the week.

$2.98 as compared with $4.25. She concedes that she must spend more money for clothes - since the factory is hard on working clothes and she must be so much on the street.

Household work pays better. They seem to agree that it is healthier work. The ability to "move around","to go to the store and out into the yard", to "work an different things" , to "breathe oxygen", "to have a warm noon meal", are advantages over factory and shop which they admit

Not that they ignore the new developments in factory conditions. One girl remarks that"there are factories where they are making things nice enough that in some places it is a pleasure to work"and another girl says truthfully that "the present up to date factory is a good example for some homes". But taking it all in all there is a general

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agreement that housework is the better paid and healthier employment.

Another advantage which many see in it is the training it gives for marriage. Let no one suppose that matrimony is excluded from these girls plans. They take it as a matter of course and they are alive to the preparation they may get through one kind or another of work. Housework gives them training in managing a house and in cooking. It teaches them thrift. Several point out that the "houseworker married"is more likely to be contented with her home and work" for as one sagely remarks "the factory life takes the liking of housework away". ~~Shex~~

~~[illegible]~~

There is not however, anywhere near as much said for the house as a training place for marriage as one might expect and they find a good many points in factory and shop work of which most women employers have never thought and which unqeustionably they must meet if they are to win back their boycotters. They argue eloquently that the fact that a factory girl has club life open to her gives her much more opportunity to prepare herself to be a good wife. There they can learn to cook and to take care of a home and they can also learn there "to talk intelligently on the important subjects of the day - business as well as others which helps her to be a companion to her husband". "A wife is not one that can just keep house well. She must be interesting, handy, kind, loving, unselfish, a willing worker, and saver of his earnings, have many qualities to keep a man's affection. It isn't housekeeping alone. Her personality, intelligence, character".

And yet with such frank concessions of its advantages, the bulk of the testimony is against household work. And why? These are ~~the~~ certain complaints that run through the entire testimony, whether it comes from the girl in the factory or the girl in the kitchen.

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The first of these is that all her waking hours are as a rule absorbed by her employment, the leisure she has even in the best places coming at times when it avails her little for social or educational purposes. The most generous arrangement of time off which is allowed now to the houseworkers - still mortgages their evenings, their holidays, and the greater part if not all of their Sundays. Compare the hours of even the unenlightened factories and shops of today - and there are multitudes of them in spite of the pressure that dissatisfied workers and a more scientific management are bring to shorten them - compare their 9 or 10 regular hours - the day ending at 6 at the latest, their holidays and Sundays with the 12 to 14 hours that a domestic worker must be within reach if not busy, for at least 6 and usually 7 days a week. It is not the fatigue of it. On the whole she believes this to be less than the fatigue of factory. It is the fact that it cuts her off from joining in pleasure and the occupations of her class. These girls write with terrible earnestness on this matter. They enumerate the deprivations the long day brings them;- no movies, no social clubs, no church, no opportunities for self-improvement through the lecture courses and the night classes which are offered on every hand; no opportunity to join for the all day holiday excursions so precious to working people - never a week end in the country. And then vacations - true the vacation is by no means universal in industry, but it is given in scores of places sometimes with pay. It is almost unknown in housework. If there is a variation in this hard program it must be obtained by "asking permission" and it is obvious that she don't like this.

The limitation which long hours set not only on their chances for fun and education but to marry has weight with all girls. It cuts off their opportunities "to meet fellows and have every night off to go to shows" is the revealing answer of one young woman. Few put it so inelegantly but she has the essence of their complaint. She really means the same thing as the girl who prefers the factory because it "gives

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her more time and opportunity to mingle and become acquainted with her fellow beings"

Throughout this bulk of testimony there runs a complaint which puts a still harder face on the social limitations of housework. This girl whose day is stretched so long that most evening pleasures and advantages are sniped off its end has no suitable place at home to receive visitors who otherwise might enliven a late hour or two. We women have made a great in the land over the factories, - of and shops which have failed to provide proper rest and lunch rooms for girls - but we seems not to care particularly that girls in domestic service usually have no place in which to receive a guest but the kitchen and that rarely is it either cheerful or properly furnished for a guest. It is a grievance which is just and which it is fair to encourage her in airing. "Attic rooms" - "no heat" - no ventilation" - "no comforts" figure in these answers to a degree that no one would have believed possible considering the character of the girls.

And yet it is not hours with all their obvious disadvantages which tip the scale against housework. It is the atmosphere of servility which envelopes it. It is an occupation around which still clings the marks of the old regime It is one of the great occupations into which the employer has been unable to infuse Democratic feeling. The best of us feel our superiority to our employed and in spite of all effort resent anything like an equal human footing. The girl who has caught some sense of the dignity of labor and who is struggling for respect and recognition from others cannot endure this. She knows that her chances of social life and of marriage are both limited if she is known to be a houseworker. She goes into a factory to escape this.

There is a pathetic protest in many of these letters against the popular contempt for house work. "It is as honorable as any other work, then why should the girl be obliged to suffer treatment as an inferior being!" No doubt the girl herself is partly responsible. She is not free from a certain contempt for all work.

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In this she is one with the vast majority of women in this country. In spite of all our loud talk about economic independence most of us would prefer to say "I do not have to work for my living" to saying "I do my best to pay my way". All classes of women who work do their best as a rule to find employment which will interfere as little as possible with their social standing. And it is not the working girl alone who takes the opportunity to pose as a lady of leisure. Not many moons ago I ran on a small group of Western teachers in a New England resort. They were posing blatantly as "having means"! - so blatantly that they finally were discovered. There case was that of the most skillful manicurist that ever touched my hands - an educated and interesting woman. She came to me in a European hotel. If there was a knock at the door her tools went swiftly into a convenient bag, she seized a book and by a metamorphosis, which always left me gaping, became an idle gossiping caller! "I don't want anyone to know," she said "that I earn my living." That is these women preferred to be thought economically dependent!

Surely we should understand the objection that the girl who enters housework is "looked down upon" by girls in other occupations and is not wanted as a wife by an ambitious mechanic, policeman or clerk.

What effects her even more deeply than the ostracism of what she feels should be her own class is the attitude of her employers - the atmosphere of superiority in which they unconsciously perhaps, wrap themselves. It is described as a feeling that she is "owned", is "everybody's servant" is "one who should not have any social standing" - "one who ought not to have any pleasure". This is what cuts most deeply into the mind of the ambitious girl. You will find her declaring that this is all wrong, that the duties are worthy, that with training, domestic work might be a pride and a joy but that she cannot stand up against the mental attitude of her employer. It is well for this country that she will not consent to do so. Nothing could be worse for us than a great body of young women who did not object to being "looked down upon".

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Those are her objections to the great natural trade of working womankind. These are the reasons of her boycott.. Does she see any way out? Often she does and her answers are almost a prayer to the employer to heed and co-operate. ? An eight hour day - or at least hours so arranged that she may have some social life, and use the opportunities for advancement she craves; a place to entertain her friends; consideration - "kindness and politeness" in treatment;- "more privileges" "co-operation". These arethe burden of her suggestions. If these things were possible in housework the impression that I at least get from these questionnaires is that there are multitudes of self respecting and ambitious girls who would train themselves for it and who believe that they can make it respected.

Is it possible for the employer to meet these demands? She certainly will never do it be settling back as the old fashioned factory and shop owner and manager did in the past - often does today- saying "I give the employment it must be done on my terms". He has learned that he cannot carry out that program. Hours, wages, conditions have and are being settled in the indsutrial world according to the desires of the workers. And intelligent and open-minded employers of labor of the new scientific school are proving every day that in yielding they have not only dropped off their backs a world of tormenting human questions, but they have increased their profits and the stability of their business.

May it not be that if women will try to meet half way the grievances which are keeping the best type of girl out of domestic work she will learn that she too, has dropped a load, has caught a new and inspiring conception of democracy and greatly increased the efficiency and the economy of her household.

The way the girls point has not been entirely untried. With the report of the Household Employment Commission of the Young Woman's Christian Association there came to my desk a little book called "Wanted A Young Woman to do Housework".

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It is written by a woman who had attacked the problem from the same side as the Commission - the girl's side. Her conclusions as to grievances are practically the same as those one gathers from the answers in the questionnaire. The girl boycotts housework because of:-

Enforced separation from one's family.

Loss of personal freedom.

Lack of promotion.

Unlimited hours of work.

No day of rest each week.

Non-observance of legal holidays.

Loss of caste.

Why should she not do so?

Mrs. Baker, the author and certain women whom she quotes seems to have seen no reason whatever and they set out to remove the grievances, that is, to put housework on a business basis handling it practically as it is handled in a modern factory: Mrs. Baker neither feeds nor houses her employees. She arranges an eight hour day of steady, carefully planned tasks, and if any one is obliged to work over-time she pays her at the rate of 1½ times the regular hourly wage as is done in the factories. They work but six days a week and all holidays are faithfully observed.

She wants those who would follow the schedules she presents that it is impossible to succeed unless they are willing to apply brains and give of their time. It is a matter of management - demanding the same kind of regular daily effort that a man gives to his business. They cannot succeed by good intentions merely. They must be trained - that is more important than that the employee be trained. Nor can she succeed if they think by this method finally to escape care and personal effort. The new method is a more difficult than the old but it is also more intelligent and interesting.

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Will girls consent to this regime? Here is the experience of one New York woman quoted by Mrs. Baker: "he had utterly failed to find a satisfactory girl for general housework. inally on the advice of a friend she put out the following advertisement:-

"Wanted: a young woman to help with housework, eight hours a day, six days a week, sleep home. Apply by letter only."

On the day the advertisement appeared - 85 applications were received - the following day 20. The same advertisement has been inserted at different times and has always brought the same result - from 100 to 160 answers each time.

Mrs. Baker writes "Two very important facts came to light through the help of this advertisement, one was to find so many women eager to do housework when it was limited to eight hours a day and six days a week, and the other was the fear that they were willing to board and lodge themselves, as well as work, for the same wages that 'servants' are accustomed to receive, although to the latter the housewife invariably gives gratis all food and sleeping accomodations. These two facts alone prove beyond a doubt that by applying business principles to housework all objections to it as a means of earning a livelihood are removed."

These conclusions arethe same that will be forced on any candid reader of the documents gathered by the Young Woman's Christian Association Commission. Are the girls not right? Is not a regulated day leaving them free for pleasure, self-improvement and a life of their own vastly more desirable than the extra money and conforts of unregulated housework in an atmosphere of servility? Are the woman employers going to heed their ambitions and find a way?"

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