THE MODERN HOME AND THE DOMESTIC PROBLEM

OF ALL the influences that tend to conserve what is best in humanity and to urge it ceaselessly toward higher development, perhaps the farthest reaching and therefore the most powerful is the idea of home. The thought of home as a place of refuge, where a man may rest from the battle of life and where mother and children are sheltered and safe, is an idea as old as the human race, and even amid the distractions and complexities of modern civilization the thought of what the ideal home should mean to us is as fondly cherished as it was in the days of the patriarchs, and has an even greater significance because of our wider understanding of the relative values of life. But too often in these days the question forces itself upon us as to what home really does mean, and whether it fulfills as perfectly its mission as a center of peace and loving-kindness as it did in simpler times. The idea of home is as sacred and beautiful as ever, but the reality is too often exactly the opposite of what it was meant to be. Instead of a refuge from the cares of the world, it is made a burden that taxes to the last limit of endurance the energy and the resources of the man who maintains it, and the woman who rules over it finds herself old before her time with the nerve-racking strain and worry of housekeeping and entertaining. And the inevitable result of these conditions is that it becomes a restraint instead of an inspiration to the children who grow up within its walls.

Clearly it is not the idea of home that is at fault. That has never changed, and so long as love and the tender care of children supply the chief motive power in the spiritual advancement of the human race it never will change. But the administration of the home is being torn between two influences—the absolutely changed conditions of modern life, with its wide opportunities and complex demands, and the conservatism which induces the belief that the foundations of society would crumble if there were any radical change in the old-fashioned methods of keeping house.

Little as we have liked to admit the necessity of such a change, the fact that sooner or later it must come about if the idea of home is to keep pace with the advance of civilization is being acknowledged on every hand. Amid the many problems, social, industrial, and political, that engage our attention, none presses more urgently for solution
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than does the question of evolving some practical method of adjusting
our household affairs so that the work of housekeeping may be car-
ried on with no more waste of time, energy, or money than is involved
in the conduct of any other well-managed business. In fact, as the
home is the unit of the nation and the training school of its citizens,
the domestic problem lies at the root of all the rest, and the solution
of it would come very near to furnishing the key to the whole complex,
artificial situation of which we complain.

O F L A T E years some daring thinkers have advocated openly the
idea that a radical change in the existing administration of the
home would result in almost incalculable benefit to the nation,
both in the lifting of present burdens and the stoppage of innumerable
economic leaks, and in the effect upon the development of future
generations. It has been argued that there really is no sense in mak-
ing the home the one exception to all the industries and institutions
that benefit from modern improved conditions, and that its sweetness
and sacredness need in no way be impaired by the loss of a few anti-
quated methods and customs that have survived their own primitive
times merely by the binding force of tradition—never more binding
than when applied to our idea of home. This argument has been
partly applauded and partly condemned, and yet some attempts are
being made to put it to the test of practical application. As yet, these
attempts are more or less tentative, and some of them have been car-
rried by extremists to the boundary of absurdity, but the idea has been
suggested and the suggestion has borne with it a certain assurance of
practicality, and that, in our day and nation, is enough to insure it a
hearing and a fair test.

Strangely enough, it is our own great love of home and our keen
realization of what it might and should mean to us that has kept it
lagging centuries behind the swift advance of the industrial world.
With all the necessaries of life ready to be brought to our door; with
all the modern facilities for disposing quickly and methodically of all
kinds of work both by machinery and by specially trained hands, there
is still baking-day and sweeping-day and washing-day and ironing-
day each week, to do with infinite labor in each separate household
what might be done so quickly and easily and economically if the com-
mon sense, coöperative methods that facilitate the work in any shop
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or factory were only applied to housework. And yet we hesitate to apply them because of the sacredness of home and the tender beauty of woman’s undivided rule therein. We cling fondly to our preconceived ideal of home, inherited from generations of ancestors whose home was their world, forgetting how seldom it is realized in this age, when the world is our home; forgetting how the toil and worry of housekeeping, warring with the manifold demands of modern life with its rich and varied interests, dwarfs the nature of the woman with a ceaseless round of petty cares and duties, and how the constantly increasing expense of it burdens the man.

TO MANY people the domestic problem implies merely the “servant question,” and there is endless theorizing and experimenting with the object in view of training and maintaining a class of workers who can be depended on to give as adequate service in the house as is given by the employees of shop or factory. But as a matter of fact the question of service is a very small part of it. Set right the conditions of household work and there will be no difficulty about finding the workers. The unpopularity of housework with our working girls and women who swarm to the factories is not caused by the work itself, but by the conditions under which it is done and the social status of the servant as opposed to that of the worker. The primitive drudgery of domestic work done according to the methods of our great-grandmothers has few attractions to any woman intelligent enough to earn her bread in any other way, and no woman thinks of taking up housework as a permanent occupation unless it carries with it the privileges of proprietorship in her own home or the right to dispose as she thinks best of her own leisure time. With the steadily increasing opportunities for wage-earning women in the industrial world, the supply of even tolerable servants is growing as steadily less, and that in spite of domestic training-schools and high wages. Shop girls, stenographers, and factory hands are to be had by the thousand, but one haunts the intelligence offices in vain in the effort to secure a fairly competent cook or housemaid. The answer is always the same, they would rather do more work for less money and feel that after their work is done their time is their own to do just as they please, than be a servant always at the beck and call of their mistress for any sort of unorganized work that her whim may demand, and have

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their leisure, as well as their working hours, subject to the rules of the house.

The only way to secure unvarying good service is to be independent of servants, and before we can make that declaration of independence we must sacrifice many of the customs to which we cling and turn our backs upon some of our most cherished myths. Without exactly realizing it we have already outgrown most of them, and there are a number of others that never would be missed. Our grandmothers, who carded, spun, and wove the cloth which was fashioned by their own hands into garments for all the household, would have been shocked at the idea of buying ready-made clothing as subversive of all the principles of a thrifty housewife, and the woman of to-day, who takes the product of the shops as a matter of course, is shocked at the idea of any other than home cooking and is inclined to consider it an extravagance to “put out” her laundry work or to hire trained cleaners to do her sweeping, dusting, and window washing. As a matter of fact, the product of any good bakery or delicatessen shop is better cooking than is done in thousands of homes by untrained cooks, and is much less expensive in the long run, when the expenditure of time, energy, and material is taken into account, to say nothing of the cook’s wages or of doctor’s bills for treating dyspeptics. The same principle applies all along the line. Skilled workers who make a specialty of any kind of work, and who do it independently as a regular business carried on with business methods, give much better and more economical service to a number of patrons than an unskilled servant can possibly give in attempting to do in more or less haphazard fashion the work of one household. A thoroughly good cook, running a large, well-organized kitchen with facilities for supplying twenty or a hundred families, and filling each individual order for cooked food as a grocer or butcher would fill it for the raw material, would give much better and more economical service than twenty ordinary cooks in twenty separate kitchens, besides ridding the household of all the drudgery incident to the preparation of food according to the usual cumbersome home methods.

UNDER modern conditions there is no reason why all necessary work of the household should not be so managed as to occupy but a tenth of the time and use but a tenth of the energy that is now expended by the woman of moderate means, who either strug-
gles with such servants as she can get, or, in despair, tries to "do her own work." The only difficulty in the way of such a reform is the unnecessary work. Our houses are cumbered with unnecessary things as our lives are cumbered with unnecessary customs and ceremonies, and we will have to sweep most of them into the rubbish-heap before we can be really free to make our homes what it is possible for them to be. Martha, cumbered with many cares, is a far commoner type of woman than Mary, who chooses the better part. And even if Martha, too, longs for the better part, she goes about seeking it in a way that leaves her still cumbered with many cares. She is honest and conscientious, and she strives earnestly to do her best for her home and her children, but what a fearful amount of energy she wastes in the doing! If convinced that her knowledge is not equal to her task, she strives to increase it by joining Household Clubs and Mothers’ Clubs and acquiring many high-sounding theories and "beautiful thoughts" about the management of home and children—theories propounded with fluent ease and absolute conviction by women whose entire knowledge of the subject is gained from books. The result is that poor Martha’s last state is worse than her first, for the knowledge she seeks lies only within her own experience and the right answer to her personal problems will come only when she works them out herself. Mary’s way would be to broaden heart and mind by keeping in touch with all of life that she could reach, and so gaining a general knowledge that would serve to keep her mentally alert and in a position to learn from each experience how best to grapple with the next.

This is the age of opportunity for woman. Her age-long limitation to the four walls of her own home, and to the duties and occupations that are conventionally "womanly," is past, and if she will she may be free to live as broadly in her mental and social life as does man, and to handle her own difficulties with the same general knowledge of life and its conditions as he brings to bear upon his. The only obstacle now in the way of her development is her own conservatism and reluctance to free her life from the unnecessary things that hamper it. When she is forced by the relentless pressure of circumstances into doing this, she will become the real home-maker—not the household drudge or the worried mistress of unsatisfactory servants, and the home over which she presides will fulfil all the beautiful pos-
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sibilities implied in the home idea that has survived so much, and be in truth a training-school for citizens in whose hands one day will lie the greatness of the nation.

The conservatism of woman is by no means wholly due to her own view-point. The much-praised liberality and indulgence of the American man toward his wife is largely responsible for the false notion that the ideal condition of happiness for a woman is unbounded leisure and opportunity to amuse herself. Convention dictates that a prosperous man must keep his wife in luxury and freedom from any real work or actual experience of life on peril of failing in his duty to his family, and she accepts his bounty passively, never thinking that in doing so she is forfeiting her greatest opportunity for development. One of the greatest difficulties in the way of a broader and serener home life is our false conception of what makes for woman’s highest welfare. With the passing of the present complex conditions this conventional belief that leisure and indulgence in a home where she is sheltered from all contact with the world is the highest ideal of a woman’s life, must pass also, and leave her free to develop as she will.

It is the urge of necessity that has brought us to the brink of a change in the administration of our domestic affairs. The old order of things is nearly at an end, for each year it is becoming more impossible to keep our houses running on the old cumbersome basis. When once we realize that the idea of home will not be swept aside, but developed, by the change, and that it can not but bring greater opportunities for freedom and happiness, we will welcome it as we welcome any step in the general advancement of civilization, and do our utmost in every practical way to bring it about. It is with the idea of giving what help I can that I intend to follow this brief review of the situation with a series of articles dealing with the practical side of each phase of the domestic problem hinted at here, and suggesting a solution that, from the view-point of my own knowledge and experience, seems likely to win its own right to an actual test.

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