DID YOU KNOW THAT HOUSEHOLD SERVICE IS A PROBLEM?

It Is, and a Government Official Marshals Some Impressive Facts to Prove That It Is Not the Less a Labor Question Because There Is No Housekeepers' Union.

THE problem of household service is primarily a labor problem—not only in the very general sense, because it is a problem of human effort, but in the much more specific sense—a problem of hired labor, of relations between employer and employe, a problem of labor contract, of wages, hours, and other conditions of life and work.

The observation seems trite enough until the attitude of the public to the situation is examined. Some years ago I had the opportunity to discuss the problem of domestic service from the point of view of the domestic servant before an exceptionally intelligent and sympathetic audience at the New York Teachers College. The general attitude of the press and of influential public opinion was such as to explain why this point of view is not taken more frequently. I had no complaint to make as to the amount of notoriety suddenly acquired—I received almost as much of it as if I had cracked the skull of a strikebreaker—I could not have shocked the sensibilities of the public more by a brick. An important metropolitan daily reported the lecture under the sensational headline: "Bold man defends servant girl"—indeed the general tenor of the press notices was such as to emphasize the "nerve" necessary to present labor's side of the servant girl problem.

That there is the housekeeper's side of the story, and that it is well worthy of study, need not be denied. Also, the general sociological nature of the problem is by this time fairly well understood. It is agreed upon by most serious students of the problem that the entire organization of our home represents largely a survival of mediaeval conditions, now practically unknown in other branches of productive effort, at least in civilized communities; that the backwardness of the technical organization of our home, and, therefore, also of its economic organization, is due to the large supply of cheap or free female labor for which there is no demand outside of the home; that, furthermore, the backwardness in the development of the home causing an antiquated labor contract, with an exceptional restriction of the worker's personal liberty, makes for social discrimination against this vocation, and causes that lack of servants which is one aspect of the problem.

It was, I believe, my personal contribution to the study of the problem to point out that, sociologically speaking, (that is, taking in at one glance large and organic changes of social life,) there is an automatic corrective to this problem in the new fields of endeavor opened to woman's energy and the consequent movement of female wageworkers away from domestic service into those other fields. For with the rapid decrease in that large supply of cheap labor the technical progress and economic reorganization of the home becomes an urgent necessity, to be solved by the technical genius of the twentieth century, even as the problem of rapid transportation was solved in the nineteenth.

It is not at all difficult to imagine a degree of progress in the organization of our home when the private servant, first an absolute necessity, then a convenience, later a luxury, will finally become as extinct as a dodo through the operation of a remedy which may be succinctly summarized in two words, "scientific housekeeping."

There are, however, two important limitations to the practical usefulness, if not the scientific accuracy, of this prophecy.

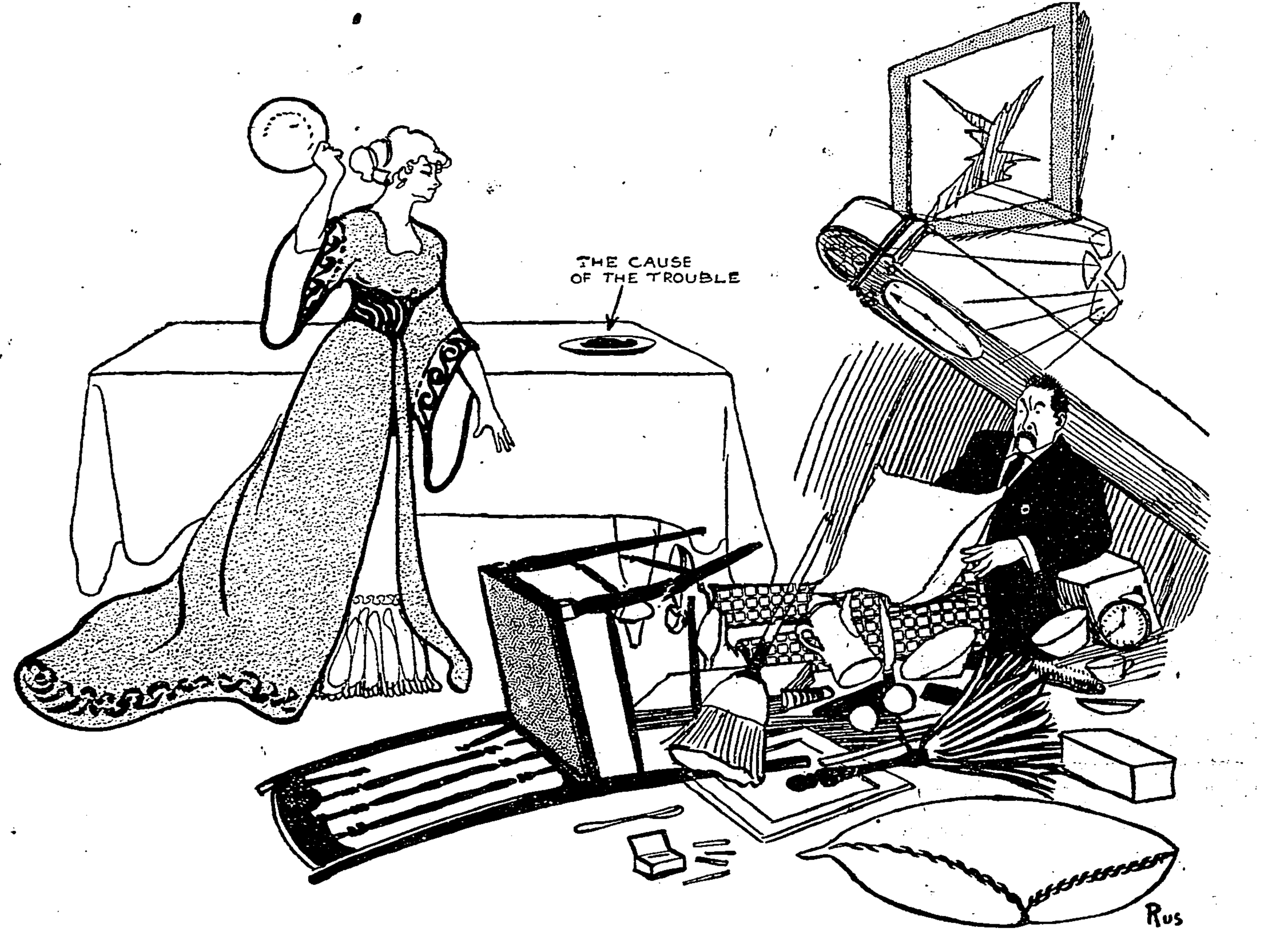
The first is that of time. Sociological changes take ages, and it is not in the nature of sentient humanity to be satisfied with visions of a future golden age when confronted with live, throbbing economic and social problems.

Secondly, even the entire disappearance of the servant in the house, even the disappearance of the private home itself, if it were likely to happen, would not solve the problem of domestic service, for simultaneously with it there is a rapid development of institutional life, where a new problem of household service arises.

For, after all, what is a social problem? If I may be permitted to indulge in the scientific vernacular of modern sociology—a social problem is a condition of social maladjustment. Its manifestations are discomfort and pain, finding outward expression in dissatisfaction and complaints.

To judge by this formula, there is a formidable problem of household service, for surely there is no dearth of discomfort, dissatisfaction, and complaints.

This is a matter of common observation. But unfortunately little more than common observation is as yet available, and a thorough study of the facts of household service is the first step toward its solution. No large investigation of domestic service in this country has ever been undertaken.



Frightful Result of Unscientific Household Service.

There is no intention to throw any discredit upon the very useful and suggestive methods made by Prof. Lucy Salmon, Miss Gail Laughlin, Miss Frances Kellor, or the energetic workers of the Boston Educational and Industrial Union, or even such individual studies as was undertaken by Miss Pettengill by means of the masquerading methods made classical by the American reporters. As Miss Rheta Dorr has well stated, "We have not yet reached the point of sending agents to inquire: 'How many servants do you keep? What are their hours of work, and what kind of sleeping accommodations do you furnish them?' At least we have not yet done it on any large scale."

Perhaps the only reliable data covering the entire United States which we possess are those of the United States Census. Unfortunately, they do not go very deeply into the problem. The American people have not yet seen fit to require of the Census as extensive a study of the sociological phenomena as is given to commercial and industrial life. Nevertheless the Census data are extremely valuable as far as they go.

To begin with, they tell us that there were in 1900, 1,460,000 servants and 107,000 waiters, making a total of 1,565,000. If to this group we should add 158,000 housekeepers and stewards, 325,000 laundresses, and 100,000 untrained nurses, we obtain the gigantic total of 2,146,000 persons in the household occupations, and the list is far from complete.

It may not be generally known that this represents the largest occupational group outside of farmers and agricultural laborers; that it is more than four times as large as the total number of miners, whose condition was studied carefully and repeatedly; that it is more than eight times as large as the total number of cotton mill employes, to whom a twelve-hundred-page volume is devoted, published a few days ago by the United States Bureau of Labor.

One million eight hundred and fifty thousand of these, or 86 per cent., are women, representing the very largest group of woman labor which was investigated by the National Government at a cost of $300,000, specially appropriated by Congress. They represent more than one-third of all women employed in remunerative occupations.

Nearly 140,000 of them are under 16 years of age; thus we have the elements of a large child-labor problem, which as yet remains almost untouched by scientific investigation.

The particular grievances and problems in this branch of wage labor are to a large extent no different from those in other branches, though, in addition, specific grievances are not lacking. They are concerned first with wages, hours, Sunday rest, and similar conditions of the labor contract; second, with the conditions of work, such as the hygienic conditions of the kitchen—the workshop of the household worker; finally, there are the grievances pertaining specifically to the treatment of the wageworker, but analogous, if not similar, problems of administration are not infrequent in the industrial field.

Perhaps the most distinctive detail is that of the living conditions—food, shelter, and sleeping accommodations. These are questions which at present but rarely arise in the industrial field, though in the past living out was a common feature of the industrial wage contract, and is still common in commercial employments in England.

These material problems, in my conviction, are much more important than the purely psychological problem of social status. Moreover, it must be admitted that, at the bottom, the causes of the social status are largely found either in the present material conditions, or in the inevitable survival of the psychological results of past material conditions of domestic service.

Are the grievances justifiable? Unfortunately, no definite answer can be given to this question for lack of definite material scientifically gathered and scientifically interpreted. It is a commonplace to assert that the undersupply of household labor is caused by a social prejudice in spite of material advantages, but after all it is the accepted opinion of the employers only. Whether the employes would agree to this generalization is extremely doubtful. Each one of us has a thorough knowledge of a very few individual cases. But in the field of industrial labor such intimate personal knowledge, because of its narrow limits, was never considered sufficient material for deductions. The truth is that the conditions of household service are subject to fluctuations which are as wide as the fluctuations of woman's character. I need not tell you how wide these are.

In some homes the conditions may be ideal, the hours short, the food excellent, the wages satisfactory; in others just the opposite of all this. Were a thorough study of these conditions made it is my suspicion that the general picture would be very far from that sentimental view which so many perfectly sincere ladies wish to convey. In any case the peculiar condition of household service is that the new employe has often little or nothing to base his opinion on in advance of actual experience except it be a certain shrewdness in estimating human nature, acquired in the course of many years. May not this circumstance alone be a sufficient explanation of the extreme mobility and inconstancy of domestic service, the greatest grievance of the employer?

Industrial labor has discovered only two effective methods for remedying such specific grievances of the labor contract and the conditions of labor. These are: First, co-operative efforts, technically styled collective bargaining, operating through the organization of labor unions; and second, compulsory regulation by society through the authority of law: labor legislation.

It has been tacitly assumed that neither of these two methods is applicable to the conditions of domestic service. This appears to me to be a serious mistake. That special difficulties arise because of special conditions, no one will deny. But these difficulties are not unsurmountable.

When a few years ago I dared to make the suggestion that the hours of labor of our household workers should be regulated by law, the suggestion raised a veritable storm of protest. It was dismissed as an impossibility, a dream. It was pointed out triumphantly that only a man thoroughly ignorant of the conditions of home life could devise such a plan. The inquisitive wanted to know whether I have ever employed any servants. Others were quite sure that I must be a bachelor. You cannot squeeze three meals into eight hours, said one editor, and dismissed the preposterous suggestion therewith.

Such arguments appear simply childish, to say the least, to one who does not lose sight of the comparative point of view. The situation is not unique; it has numerous analogies in the history of all labor legislation.

There never was a new labor law that was not met with the identical argument that it was thoroughly impractical, that it tried to change a condition that was absolutely essential to the industry, that it would destroy the industry altogether. This was argued against legislation prohibiting night work; this was argued against all child-labor legislation, against all modern legislation limiting hours of labor for women, providing seats for department store employes, or even protective glass hoods for tram car employes. It was essential to run the factory full blast all through the night; it was essential that the women work more than ten hours; that the industry employ children of ten or even eight; that all salesgirls stand throughout the day, and that the motormen be exposed to the inclement weather, until ordered differently by legislation.

Furthermore, the analogy need not go beyond the domain of household service. To the European observer, new to the ways of this country, the existing conditions of domestic service would often appear to be absolutely impossible and incompatible with any degree of middle-class comfort. To the German it would appear to be absolutely unthinkable that a gentleman should polish his own shoes, shake his own furnace, or even sift his own ashes. A Russian refuses to comprehend how a middle-class American with an income of $1,500 or $2,000 can lead the life of a gentleman without a servant in the house at all.

Moreover, we may find interesting analogies even in our own country. Even if the conditions of household service required continuous service, and even if the limitation of hours would necessitate relays of workers, the objections against it might apply to a house with one servant, less to the household with more than one servant, and not at all to the institutional household with a large force of household employes.

Supposing that such a law were to be adopted and an exception made in favor of households with only one employe, what would the chances be of the smaller household obtaining an efficient, self-respecting employe? And if this should force such families as must have hired domestic labor to some sort of limited co-operation, would that be such a very bad thing after all?

Unfortunately we have no means of even estimating the proportion of household workers who are employed by institutions rather than by private families. The statistics of families and dwellings presented by the twelfth census are very unsatisfactory, and careful conclusions are impossible.

According to the data available there were 223,000 households other than private families, or less than 1½ per cent. of the total number of households. They represented a population of 2,500,000, or 3½ per cent. of the entire population of the country.

Proportionately, however, a very much larger percentage of the household workers are employed by the many and rapidly increasing institutions, such as hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, lunch rooms, clubs, hospitals, asylums, homes, boarding schools, dormitories, &c. The one fact that there were in 1900 more than 100,000 waiters and waitresses is sufficiently significant.

The tremendous importance of this rapid development of institutional life for the solution of the problems of household service has never, as far as I am aware, been pointed out. That there are many differences in the social and economic status of labor in these large collective households on one hand, and the private families on the other, is quite true. Nevertheless, the essential likeness of the work performed, and the identical source of the labor supply is sufficient assurance that co-operation and unity of action between these two groups is entirely feasible.

It is quite evident that legislative regulation of the conditions of labor in these large households is entirely practicable. Thus, to carry further the analogy, which was utilized before, the private household appears not unlike the small and antiquated shop which protests against labor and factory legislation on the ground that it cannot live up to it. But when the law is stringent enough it must live up to it or vanish, and if its existence is socially necessary it usually manages to live up to it.

Palatial Apartment of the New Maid.

In the other method of improving labor conditions, that of co-collective bargaining through unions, the large household will also prove to be the leader in the professional advance. The isolated position of the domestic workers made all collective efforts among them well high impossible; and if all household workers were in that isolated position the hope of their unionization would be practically useless. But unions of hotel employes are not at all impossible, nor have they remained unknown in this country or abroad.

Even if the first efforts of unionizing female employes of such households will not prove easy, and will meet the same difficulties which lie in the way of unions of all wage-working women, they are not insurmountable. In actual life the employes of these large households already have influenced the conditions of domestic service in private homes by establishing certain standards as ideals, and protective labor legislation and direct union action will further help in the establishment of such standards, the absence of which in the private homes at present is one of the greatest objections to them from the employe's point of view.

What will these standards aim at, and what will they be? A little rational speculation as to the future may here be indulged in. Primarily they will deal with hours, of course, as all collective bargaining does, for the indeterminate length of service, if not of actual labor, is perhaps the greatest objection to domestic service that labor advances.

But only next to this will come—is coming—the destruction of the mediaeval, patriarchal relation between the employer and employe. The fiction of being a member of the family—at $3 or $4 per week—has been definitely abandoned in the large households, which may be one of the most important reasons for their greater popularity among the working women. Why should we assume for a moment that a modern household worker is more ready to change her family affiliations at a moment's notice and in harmony with the employment agency's advice than would be a faithful lap dog or even a thoroughly domesticated cat? The domestic servant, if at all human, has his or her family affiliations, not based upon a wage contract.

That a human and reasonably humane employer is preferable to one of the other kind, is true in domestic service as it is in manufactures or mining. But sentimental mistresses can no more be relied upon to solve the problem of domestic service than welfare work will solve the larger labor problem of factory, shop, or mine.

My suggestion that the exclusion of the servant from the house of the employer is necessary before domestic service will prove more popular with the women of the working classes has also met with protests and derision. But such exclusion is already the rule in a great many collective households, and, in fact, is practiced even in private households more frequently than is usually admitted.

The extremely interesting census report on statistics of women at work shows that in twenty-seven selected cities out of 328,000 female servants, 67,000, or over 20 per cent. lived at home, exclusive of those who boarded, and nearly 5 per cent. were even heads of families. Naturally the proportion was much greater for married or widowed women than for single ones. (The percentage being 43.3 for married women, 38.2 per cent. for widowed or divorced, and only 15.6 per cent. for single women.) It was largest for negro women, as was to be expected for other racial reasons, because the desire of the negro woman for independence, the employer's preference not to have a colored person live in the house, and also the married negro woman's willingness to remain a wage earner.

But it is still more interesting that this custom was twice as frequent among native white women than among the foreign women. It was greatest in Southern cities, being 55 per cent. in New Orleans, and 63 per cent. in Atlanta, but it amounted to 14 per cent. even in New York, and was higher in Western cities, (22 per cent. in Kansas City, 27.4 per cent. in Cincinnati, and 30 per cent. in Indianapolis.) Thus the necessary dissociation has already taken place to a very large degree. The tendency is viewed with alarm by a great many conservative housekeepers, but in so far as it has retained in domestic service in these twenty-seven cities alone 27,000 married or widowed women who otherwise might not find it possible to remain there, this has actually relieved the stringency in the labor market.

Thus labor's attitude toward the problem of domestic service is after all quite simple. You must, it virtually says to the employer, improve the conditions in this field of hired labor if you want a larger supply of labor to the field; if you want to attract us you must make conditions more attractive. What could be simpler? The assertions of thousands of housekeepers that the conditions are already sufficiently favorable and attractive do not matter one iota; it is for the persons employed to decide so or to shun the field.

Furthermore, few of the people who are ready with their solution of the problem appreciate the fact that unless there is a radical change in the condition of domestic service, either by union action or by legislation, the difficulties must rapidly grow, for the differences in the advantages of industrial and domestic must become greater. And for this reason: Backward as is this country in the field of social and labor legislation, the interest in the legal protection of labor has recently been awakened, and the next decade or two will see a feverish activity in that direction.

Protection against accidents and occupational diseases, compensation for accidents sustained, industrial hygiene, insurance against disease and invalidity, old age pensions—all these problems are carefully studied and must lead to action in the near future. In all these methods of protecting the interests of labor, only industrial labor is considered in this country, and domestic labor is as yet disregarded. Not so in Europe, and rightly so, for the questions considered are of decided interest to the two millions of wage earners in the field of domestic service.

If She Dines with the Family.

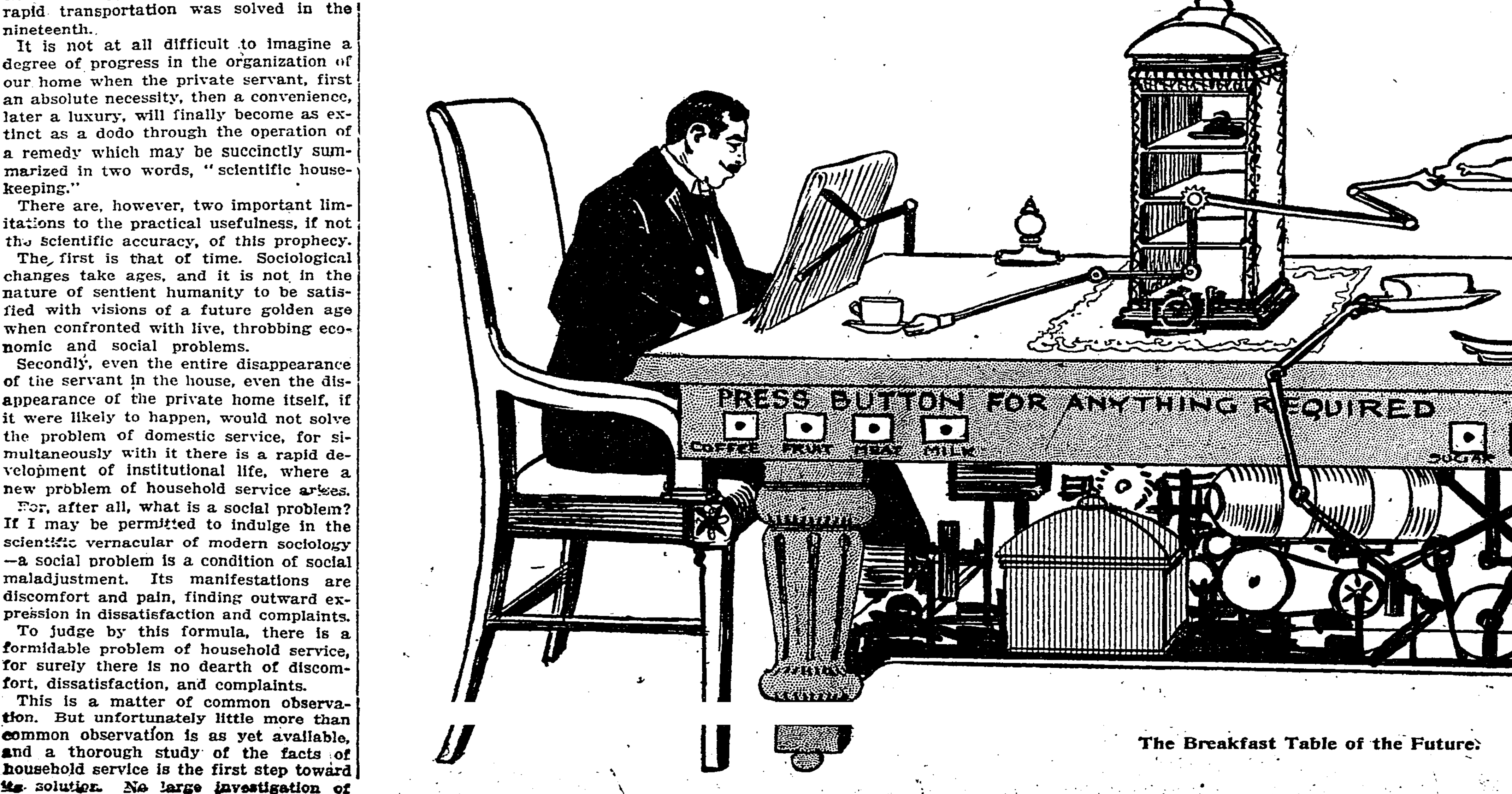
We are not inclined to associate accidents with work in the kitchen, and yet there are several elements of danger in the work, as handling hot water, other hot utensils, building fires, inhaling gas, climbing stepladders, &c. Domestic work is usually recommended for its healthfulness, and we forget that there are numerous occupational ailments connected with the work, even disregarding the housemaid's knee, which has become almost obsolete since the introduction of the carpet sweeper.

"No one," says Miss Rheta Dorr, "has even suggested to legislators that sweeping and beating carpets might be included among the dusty trades; that bending over steam-washtubs and almost immediately afterward going out into the frosty air might be harmful to throat and lungs." The criticism is correct, provided it is limited to this country, for domestic service is included in the various forms of insurance against accidents, sickness, and old age in Germany and other European countries.

The charitable housekeeper who is lost in self-admiration because she is willing to keep the servant during the first few days of sickness before removing her to a hospital, might profit by learning that the German employer of household help is required by law to contribute one-third of the cost of sickness insurance and one-half of the cost of old-age insurance.

Need we emphasize how these progressive measures for the protection of the industrial worker will affect the supply of labor for the home, unless the latter is also willing to move forward? The difference in wages alone cannot remove all these disqualifications, for after all it is a peculiar feature of female labor that it gives a high valuation to other conditions of the wage contract in making its preference for this or that industrial field.

In short, equalization in the status of the household worker with that of the worker in other industrial fields is the requirement which labor presents, as yet largely unconsciously; but the demand will become clear and unconscious in the future.



The Breakfast Table of the Future.

The New York Times
Published: January 8, 1911
Copyright © The New York Times