

Turning Tide in the Domestic Servant Market



"They aren't ready to be employed on your terms, but, oh, how they want to be employed on their own!"

By HELEN BULLITT LOWRY

BEFORE another month is over there may be a sale of cooks. Even now a cook may be had almost to your taste—if you'll shop around for her. Shopping for her, by the way, is better the first of the week. "They get sort of picked over by Friday," apologizes an employment agent, "but if you'll come in Monday we'll have a nice, fresh assortment. Those I got left this week are holding out on not washing the dishes, like they got used to doing last year."

Yet, even on Friday I was able to buy two cooks and three general houseworkers and deliver them to friends. Supply is beginning to catch up with demand.

A year ago I made the round of the agencies. Delia and Agnes took my telephone number, told me they'd consider me, and let me know. Now it's I that am considering Kate and Jenny and Lily and Clara. I've taken their nearest neighbor's telephone number and am going to let them know. True, neither Kate nor Jenny nor Lily nor Clara may be one whit more competent than Delia and Agnes. They aren't offering to work for less than the \$65 or \$75 a month wage that was established last year. But at least they want the job.

The New York cook market indeed seems to have just about reached that exciting moment that came to the ready-made clothes market eight months ago, when the prices were still held high, but the buying public also was holding out. Then people were simply not buying because they were convinced that prices would have to come down—they came.

Now the cooks aren't yet ready to be employed on your terms. But, oh, how they want to be employed on their own!

In the cook market today an agent will say to you: "I'll tell you what, if you can't afford to pay \$65 just let me file your order. I may be able to get you one for \$40 by another month. I have two orders filed for \$25 right now."

"But will you be able to fill those orders?"

"Give me time. Give me time. Wait till the cold weather strikes town. I have competent girls that are asking \$75, and have been getting \$80 and \$90, that have been sitting here day after day for a week with no one employing them. A year ago and they'd have been gobbled up."

For the New York housekeepers, it would seem, are on strike. They

have not exactly got together in a closed shop or yet engaged walking delegates, as is the way with our best unions, but somehow a great many of them have decided that the "flood of immigration" is bringing them over Olgas and Gretchens at the dear old \$35-a-month figure, if not \$25—and that, therefore, Delia and Agnes can go hang or come down.

A strike, of course, does not accomplish its ends unless backed up by the economic laws of supply and demand. And, in fact, the housewives are wrong in detail. The flood of immigration is not at present washing in cooks. Yet they are right in the main, for the closing of factories is washing them out.

Therefore children are again allowed in our homes. I know because I carefully explained that I had two of them.

At which, "Oh, thank de Lord!" breathed the respectable-looking negro woman who had stopped me on the street just outside the door of another agency. "Honey," she said, "I jes' naterly can't stand no house without its got chillen runnin' 'round yellin'. 'Aunty, ain't them cookies done?' Sure, I been cookin' cookies 'fore you born. Yes'm, I'll work for \$12 a week. It ain't what I been gittin', but I wants a good home for Winter."

Therefore, already it seems that in scattered spots the sales have begun—particularly among the "color." For north of Mason and Dixon's line the negro women have been the first to lose their high-priced places.

The restaurants and the elevators and the laundries can get white girls now. According to the agents and according to individual employers picked at random to consult, the negro women didn't make good when they had their chance at the white girls' jobs. And employers, who have known the negro servants for the first time at their very worst period, in the first flush of high wages, seem only too glad to go back to the whites.

"Four times as many colored women and ten times as many colored men come in looking for places as came in this time last year," mutters the negro employment agent in puzzled tones. Now, if I can use a married couple, he assures me, he can get them for me at a great bargain.

I passed on to another agency, where still prevailed the next to oldest order when the employment agency put the prospective employer in her place.

"Pardon me, madam," said the one in authority, "if I speak my mind, and remember it's what I'm here for. But you simply cannot get laundry and housework and cooking and nursing three and four year old children out of two women. You'll have to let me furnish you a laundress by the day, or else I'll get you a nurse. I can get you the cook and chambermaid for \$150 and the nurse will be—"

"But, please," I venture, "this is just a six-room apartment, and that wouldn't leave any room for me."

"Pardon me, madam, but I always make a point of speaking my mind. If you can't afford to pay others to do your work, you shouldn't be above doing some of it yourself"—at which moment in came two negro girls. "You might talk to these two girls, and they can make you understand what part of the work two are willing to do better than I seem to be able to."

"I'll pay you \$30 a week between you and I will expect everything from you—laundry, nursing and so forth. You can divide the work between you to suit yourselves. I have two children and I live in Brooklyn." If this was going to be a test case I wanted it to be a good one.

"When do we start to work?" asked the two girls. So apparently there are some privately marked down goods even in the most hide-bound agencies. Or maybe the game's more like a millinery shop, where every hat has its two prices, than it is like a formal department store advertised-in-the-papers sale.

Certainly Matilda has her two prices. I know even if I haven't seen Matilda, because I was there when the doctor and his wife came into the office of the agency, while I was waiting for my appointment with the clerical worker, who had decided to be a cook since the box factory had closed down.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we struck Matilda here?" whispered the doctor in the pleasant cultured voice which one associates with the heads of expensive finishing schools, where voices get finished, too.

"Sure and ye moight run into her here," nods the employment agent wisely. "Would ye take her back?"

"I'll take her back at a hundred dollars," remarks the brisk, white-haired woman, who is the doctor's wife.

"She'll not come back to your school for a hundred—not with her devil's own bride," meditates the

agent. "But she may be goin' soon to some ither place for less. For a month now she's been haunting these premises, holding out for a hundred and fifty."

"I was paying her two hundred and twenty-five last Spring when she left because I wouldn't make it two hundred and fifty," mused the doctor in starry-eyed, radiant voice. "She demanded the raise because I'd criticised her. She was working for us six months before I made a suggestion."

"Sure, and that's where ye made your mistake. Ye gave her the upper hand. Ye should have made one suggestion the first week she took hold—just to accustom her to it."

The doctor pressed his handkerchief to his brow. "We weren't taking that kind of liberties last year. And I couldn't afford to correct her either," very feelingly now. "Every time I did it her feelings were so hurt that nothing less than a \$25 raise would make her stay."

"Well, ye needn't worry any more," said the agent, cheerfully. "I've more pastry cooks now than I've need for. It's the small hotels that are all for cleaning out their high-priced help and startin' in with a fresh lot, that's maybe been out of work for a few weeks, and is in consequence not so stiff and proud. It's easier than reducin' the old help."

"Yes, yes," said the doctor, earnestly. "I don't know just how I would have gone about reducing Matilda."

"Sure, and I've been in the employment business for thirty-one years, and I'm thinkin' things in the servant problem will shortly be back to normal," contributes the agent, hopefully.

In normal times, it seems, the problem is simply to fit the right cook into the right place. "But that's none too easy a thing to do, even in the best of times," she explains, since every mistress has peculiarities, and so has every servant, and the bother of it is to find two that don't happen to get on each others' nerves.

To which sage sentiment one Pearl, who is in my own kitchen, adds "colored" philosophy.

"When there's more cooks than there is places, ladies they fires you at your first show of crankiness, and when there's more places than cooks we leaves at the first cranky thing they does or their husbands

does that's maybe the interferin' kind that wants to see how I keeps my pantry shelf.

"But, when there's jes' 'bout as many cooks as places the ladies jes' stops and sez to theirselves, 'That's jes' one of Pearl's peculiarities.' And the cooks, they sez, 'Somebody else gwine to have crankiness, too. And while I might get a better place, I might get a wusser, and maybe I won't get none for a month. And Winter's comin' on.'"

"And so the cook, she jes' stays on from week to week tryin' ter make up her mind to leave, until bime by, first thing she know, she's got used to that lady's crankiness and to the way the kitchen range works and how to prop up the 'frigerator shelf, and she wouldn't change them off for no strange crankiness that grows."

Perhaps before long that millenium will come when supply exactly balances demand. This, at least, a perusal of the columns of Help Wanted and Situations Wanted would indicate, for there are more cooks in the latter column than there are in the first. True, they are still holding out for \$75 a month, and there is still a "Young lady, colored, will accept position as cook." But, then, there are no such Help Wanted advertisements as were running twelve months ago that "Use of piano for practicing allowed two hours a day."

True, too, the women looking for places are not shabby yet. They still wear fur coats and fur-collared suits. But they aren't getting the terms that they're asking. There is still a discrepancy between Last Asked and Last Bid.

Even down on Ellis Island, where desperate women go searching for cooks, and there are no cooks, there is reason for hope, according to the social service workers whose days are spent with the women immigrants.

"They all come thinking they'll be stenographers and factory workers at \$35 a week. They are all going straight to their friends who have written to them of these high wages they are going to get," so explains one social worker. "Some of them even say they'll be models. But remember that they are girls with only home training—girls equipped for nothing but domestic service. And what will they logically do when they find that the factories are closed? The very friends and relatives to whom they go may then be out of work."