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# NEW DEAL FOR THE HOUSEWIFE

## Planned Social Life Will Use All Her Talents

A "Listener" Interview

IT is always interesting to meet a newcomer from overseas and to get a brief glimpse of another world. It is exciting and refreshing to meet someone who has not only travelled widely, but can also observe shrewdly and correlate her experiences. Mrs. Williams-Ellis is a most refreshing person to meet. She has travelled in Europe and America, written a great many books, thought deeply about social, political, and economic problems, brought up a family of three children, and she is out in New Zealand to meet her new twin grandchildren.

In the first years of her married life she was Literary Editor of the Spectator. Her first novel was published when her children were small and has been followed by many more. Other books by Mrs. Williams-Ellis (such as *Men Who Found Out*, *Fairies and Enchanters*, or the more practical *What Shall I Be?*) were written first for her own children. As a member of the Women's Voluntary Service she helped in the evacuation of children at the outbreak of the war. Ten of them were billeted in her house, and when they

went home she had as many soldiers. Towards the end of the war she was given special facilities for visiting factories so that she might write a pamphlet on *Women in War Factories*.

### House-bound Women

I began by asking Mrs. Williams-Ellis how far the shortage of domestic help was forcing the English mother back into home life.

"A good deal—and in many cases it's a great pity," she said. "It's not easy to combine home and work, but after all life demands an art. We just can't afford to waste half the human race. We should not allow the community to lose either the offspring, or the trained skill, of our most talented women. Intelligence tests seem to show that girls' brains are no worse than boys'. But women, if they are married and tied to a domestic routine, are apt not to use their talents. Work in a home demands a number of skills and continuous attention to details; it is apt to become all-absorbing and atrophies the mind. After all, in these days a civilised community educates its women. It is a pity that the community shouldn't also arrange for this expenditure to be of value to itself. Some communities are beginning to

consider this very problem. There is to-day, in most countries, a tremendous manpower shortage. In Britain we need all the people we can get in every walk of life. Then looking at it from the personal, family point of view, there is to-day a much longer expectation of life—or at least usefulness. At 50 a woman of to-day is still vigorous, but if she has been exclusively a housewife she is often at a loose end. She has become an amateur at the work that she was doing before she was married. I believe that it is ultimately to the children's benefit to have a mother with keen interests outside the home. Moreover, when the children leave her she will find herself an intellectual and emotional bankrupt. Take me, I'm 52, I consider that I still have some years of active life ahead of me and I have been able to remain skilled at my own work. I am sure that I have been a better advisor and companion to my children as they grow older for having kept my own interests, and I am sure an active wife who is used to working in the world and with people is a better helpmeet to her husband than the woman who has remained entirely absorbed in her domestic round. Please don't think that all women must have jobs. There are some quite satisfied with home-making and who make a great art of it. Good luck to them. It is their job and I don't want to drag them away from it. But I don't think we should allow the wastage of able women, frustrated by wanting to use their special powers which they may feel are atrophying in an enforced house-bound existence."

### House-cleaning Squads

"What answer have you then to this special problem of how to use married women's services?" I asked.

"I've studied the problem and how it has been met in all sorts of countries. In Britain, personal domestic service has to a great extent gone. Perhaps we deserve this as the old-time maid was not treated enough as an individual and as part of the family. I myself have been lucky. The girl I had years ago stayed on after she was married, in married quarters which we fixed up for her, and now we are old buddies and both very grateful to each other. But apart from personal service there is a great development of public facilities. For instance, ex-servicemen have formed 'House-Cleaning Squads.' The 'Busy Bees' clean my town flat. The job is thoroughly done by these ex-service people using modern electrical methods—very time-saving for the housewife.

"Secondly, there are school meals. These have been continued after the war because dietitians claim that a school meal is far better for the child than the carried lunch. It is not that the family is neglected at all, quite the reverse. Children don't have their fads indulged and they eat everything up when they are all eating together.

"Then there are the British Restaurants. These really are a boon to families and they save a considerable amount of cooking, coupons, and washing up. They were started during the war and largely staffed by voluntary workers. As they were just a war-time expedient they were closed after the war, but my brother, John Strachey, was responsible for introducing an enabling Act by



MRS. CLOUGH WILLIAMS-ELLIS

Spencer Digby photograph

"We just can't afford to waste half the human race"