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# The Overworked Mother Speaks Out

**L**ATELY there are many signs and portents that we overworked mothers are becoming the subject of benevolent consideration.

Those who in former decades might have devoted their energies to Missions for the Heathen, to Orphans, or to Homes for the Destitute Aged, are now looking compassionately in our direction, and they see that we need Help.

Who would not rejoice at the public realisation that the mother of a young family is also a Person who looks for, and needs, that occasional liberty from the daily round of work which her men-folk and her single sisters already claim? But I can't help pondering that while the benevolent attention is new, the overworked state of mothers must be at least as old as the arts of civilisation which require us to sew, wash, iron, clean and cook. Perhaps it is even older. Perhaps the Cave Wife, with her babe at her breast and her twins swinging on her long hair and her three-year-old seizing the bone when she was looking the other way, complained bitterly to her Cave Husband that it was all very well for him—with nothing to do but disport himself with hunting.

If so she was not quite fair, for when life was universally hard the woman could hardly single herself out for compassion. During the factory age of little more than a century ago, when a working man might be bound to his bench for 12 to 16 hours a day and his son went to the mine, the factory or the field at the age of five or seven, he could scarcely pity his wife for an exhaustion no heavier than his own.

"My good woman," said Mr. Dombey (through the pen of Dickens), "I understand you are poor, and wish to earn money by nursing the little boy, my son, who has been so prematurely deprived of what can never be replaced. I have no objection to your adding to the comforts of your family, by that means. So far as I can tell, you seem to be a deserving object. But I must impose one or two conditions on you, before you enter my house in that capacity. While you are here, I must stipulate that you are always known as—say, as Richards—an ordinary name, and convenient. Have you any objection to be known as Richards?"

... Mrs. Toodle dropped a curtsy and replied, "that perhaps if she was to be called out of her name, it would be considered in the wages."

"Oh, of course," said Mr. Dombey, "I desire to make it a question of wages altogether. . . . You have children of your own. It is not at all in the bargain that you need become attached to my child, or that my child need become attached to you. I don't expect or desire anything of the kind. Quite the reverse. When you go away from here, you will have concluded what is a mere matter of bargain and sale, hiring and letting; and you will stay away. The child will cease to remember you; and you will cease, if you please, to remember the child."

Mrs. Toodle, with a little more colour in her cheeks than she had before, said "she hoped she knew her place."

"I hope you do, Richards," said Mr. Dombey. "I have no doubt you know it very well. Indeed it is so plain and obvious that it could hardly be otherwise. . . ."

So did Polly Toodle, without questioning Mr. Dombey's right to demand it, agree to see her own five children no more till her engagement was concluded; and so did she, with a heart stronger than any contract, steal an opportunity to see how they were faring in the hands of her young sister Jemima; and so did Mr. Dombey, in righteous wrath, dismiss her from his service—though never from the love of baby Paul.

**N**OW if Mr. Toodle were driving our railway engines to-day he would have a 40-hour week plus overtime, and his wife, if she went out to work at all, would expect at least 2/3 an hour for stated periods. It has taken the Toodles a century to reach that degree of independence. But I often think that when good folk talk about providing overworked mothers (in general) with domestic help, they are really thinking in terms of the days of Dickens. They do not pause to reflect that while our



*"Peace and conversation are banished until it is too late for them to be of any use"*

textiles, our furniture, our crockery, our lamps and the electricity to light them are made with the minimum expenditure of time and energy, our homes are still operated on the level of peasant labour.

I would like some statistician to work out the number of women in New Zealand with more than two children of tender years to care for, and then to tell us how many girls would need to be withdrawn from industry or other women from their homes, if each were presented with a mother's helper; and

I would like him to calculate the effect upon our production and our standard of living. I feel fairly sure he would conclude that freedom from household drudgery cannot be general unless we put something more to work than the hands, the feet and the elbows of underpaid little girls and widows—which was the Victorian middle-class solution, or even of well-paid and uniformed Home Aids.

Help in the homes of the sick or the convalescent is a different question altogether. They are fewer in numbers, and it is more often a question of ability to pay market rates of wages than of availability of labour. For, while the State in its wisdom pays sickness benefit to a husband, a wife is deemed a dependant and not to have suffered financial hardship—though it costs three and four times more to engage a home helper than the bare fraction of the family income that she has been prepared to accept; and she herself has still to be fed and clothed. Some provision for social security where a housewife is incapacitated would even things up considerably.

**T**HE problem at issue however is the overworked, not the ailing mother. As I work in my home I accept, quite happily, the bedrock of daily tasks. I can conceive of no way of rationalising the making of beds or the dusting and tidying of furniture, nor would I even

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