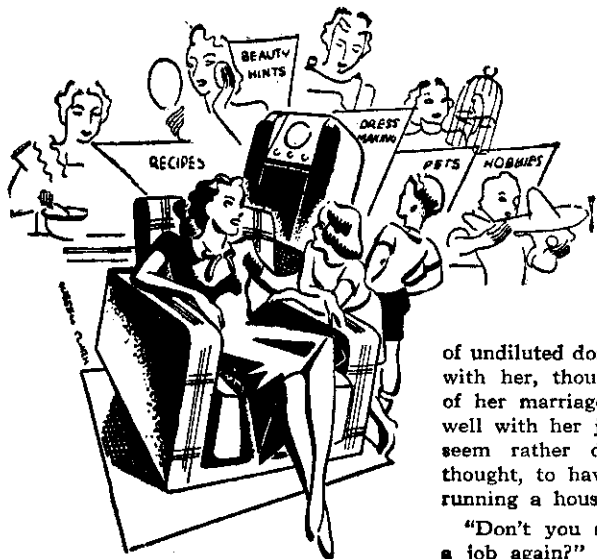


Women and the Home

Radio is the slender wire that brings the world and its affairs into the tiny kitchens and living rooms which hitherto had isolated so many housekeepers in the performance of their duties
—Margaret Bondfield



INTERVIEW

YOUNG HOUSEWIFE



I CRUNCHED across the frost-starched lawn in the wake of my friend Marian. There wasn't much in the garden now, but the patches of brown soil between the rocks of the rock-garden had been carefully forked, and no weed marred by its flaunting green the brown and grey harmony of the whole.

"And that's a Red Letter Day," said Marian proudly, pointing to a rather straggly rose bush on the other side of the Rock Garden.

"Oughtn't it to be pruned or something?" I suggested. After all, I probably knew as much about gardening as Marian did. Until a few months ago we had both been living in gardenless flats, and I at any rate had tried to do something with a window box. But now Marian and her husband had decided that six-months-old Jim needed a garden to play in, so here they were, established in a five-roomed bungalow with a quarter-acre section. And here was Marian behaving as though she, like the peasant of fiction, had been wedded to the soil for centuries.

"No," said Marian firmly, "If you pruned it now it would flower too early and probably get frost-bitten or something. It shouldn't be pruned for at least another month."

Undiluted Domesticity

Back in the sitting room I faced Marian across a cup of tea. She was certainly looking well and happy. A life

of undiluted domesticity seemed to agree with her, though during the first year of her marriage she had coped equally well with her job and the flat. It must seem rather dull and purposeless, I thought, to have to go back to merely running a house.

"Don't you sometimes wish you had a job again?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you call this a job, looking after the house, and my husband, and the garden and Jim?"

"Yes, it's probably a more exacting one than my nine-to-five. That's what I'd hate. It's such an indefinite kind of job. You can't say, 'Well, that's finished!' and go home for the week-end. You're always on duty, and there's 'no such thing as five o'clock closing.'"

"That's true," Marian confessed.

"And no regular pay envelope each week."

"There's Jack's."

"Yes, but that isn't quite the same. When you're earning you've got your own money to do as you like with. I know that nowadays husbands don't insist upon going over the household accounts monthly and that you do have the control of household spending, but you can't be recklessly, gloriously extravagant the way you used to."

"No you can't," said Marian. "Although perhaps after the war Mr. Herbert Morrison will carry his bill about allowances for wives. Not that it would make any difference to us. It all goes into the general pool."

Before the Baby Came

"But seriously, wouldn't you like to be back at the office again?"

Marian thought for a time. "No," she said, "not now. When I first left the office, I hated just staying at home. I think the worst part was being so lonely. I was used to meeting people I knew on the tram in the mornings, and then at the office there would be people

coming in and out all day, and the girls to talk to. Clearing up the flat would take only a few minutes—I was quite used to managing it and my job as well—and then I'd get terribly tired of just reading or sewing. Of course when Jim came it was different."

"But a baby isn't exactly company," I pointed out, "even if it's as intelligent as you say Jim is."

"No, you certainly can't discuss clothes or the War Effort, or What Will Russia Do, with him, but he's quite a good recipient for all the amusing or exciting thoughts that come to one over the kitchen sink. But in spite of him I was terribly alone when we first moved out here. A chat with the baker's boy was often the social highlight of the day."

"And now?"

"Now I have lots of friends. In a new neighbourhood one gets to know people very quickly, and we have many mutual problems to discuss—why the hens aren't laying and whether you should plant cabbages by the moon and the best ways of preventing Baby from sucking his thumb."

Her Own Mistress

My horror at this picture of domestic interests must have shown in my face, for Marian laughed and went on triumphantly, "And it's so nice being your own mistress. I can distribute my time as I think fit. If it's a particularly beautiful day I can go and play golf or just laze in the sun—provided of course that I'm prepared to do twice as much the next day. Whereas you have to go to the office, even if it's the first day of spring, and you feel like bounding on the hilltops."

"True," I admitted.

"And it is nice not being tied to a timetable. You don't have to run to the tram-stop to catch the eight-thirty, or spend an hour a day herded with a crowd of other wage-slavers. And you're not shut in all day. There's always the trip down to the grocer in the morning,

or the walk round the block with the dog. And even if you dislike dusting, there's an afternoon's gardening to look forward to."

"When It's Your Own"

"Since when have you been keen on gardening?" I asked. When we were both small the threat of an hour's weeding had been sufficient to ensure instant obedience.

"Ever since I've had a garden of my own," said Marian. "It's surprising what it does to you. And the same thing applies to housework, too. I remember being very difficult about helping at home, but when it's your own house there's a certain thrill in keeping it shining and cheerful."

"And no matter how heartily you may dislike housework (I don't) you have the satisfaction of knowing that you're working for people you love. That's what makes housekeeping such a worth-while business. If you spend a morning scrubbing the kitchen floor it's so that Jim won't pick up germs from it. If you make new curtains it's so that Jack will say 'How nice, dear.' But if you spend a whole morning at the office going through files or typing specifications it can't mean much to you, whereas in the house every task has an immediate application to yourself or your family."

"Yes, I see what you mean," I reflected. "Your work here is worth all your time. But what about this married men's ballot? If Jack has to go away, won't you stay with your parents and go back to your job?"

Marian thought for a while. Then she said, "No, it's this that's my job. I couldn't give up our home. I'll grow potatoes or take in boarders and parade with the W.W.S.A. two nights a week."

—M.I.



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