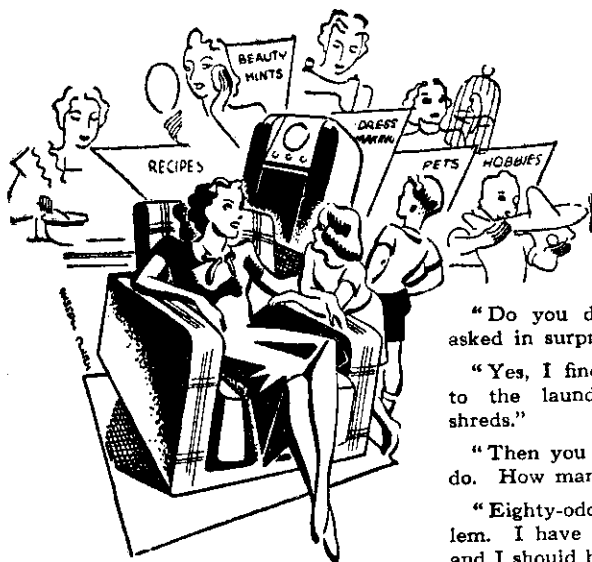


Women and the Home

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

THE LANDLADY'S STORY



I CAN'T help feeling that in modern literature, at any rate, the landlady does not get a fair deal. She is invariably depicted as the dragon part of the "George and Dragon," and this misconception has persisted in the mind of the ordinary man or woman. Our sympathies are always with the brow-beaten boarder, whose sudden change of lodging is invariably due to incompatibility or neglect on the part of his landlady. Most of my friends are nomads, wandering from place to place in search of the ideal lodging place, and never finding it. Saddened by their stories, I have naturally subscribed to the popular theory that landladies are at the best opportunists, taking advantage of the housing shortage to add to their own profits, and at the worst modern vampires, bleeding their victims white, and then, when their money is gone and their resistance is weakened by weeks of malnutrition, casting them forth once more into the cold, cold world.

The landlady's side of the story is very seldom heard. This is perhaps because there are far more boarders than there are landladies, or perhaps because the average landlady is less of a grumbler than the average boarder (has nothing to grumble about, I can hear the cynical boarder mutter), or, perhaps (and I think the landlady herself will agree with this), she's so busy she hasn't time to talk.

That was why I decided to interview a landlady and get her side of the story.

Chosen at Random

I chose one at random from "Hotels, Private," in the telephone book. An hour or so later I rapped upon a shining brass knocker and was ushered into the lounge. Ferns in pots beckoned to me from the windows and brassware glittered in the corners of the room. Mrs. —, the proprietress herself, came towards me, hands still pink from the wash-tub. She was a plump, smiling person, rather in the tradition of the English innkeeper's wife of Shakespeare's day rather than the sparse landlady of fiction with black hair in a knob on top.

"I'm so sorry I kept you waiting," she said, "but I'm in the middle of the washing."

"Do you do your own washing?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, I find that if you send things to the laundry they come back in shreds."

"Then you must have rather a lot to do. How many guests have you?"

"Eighty-odd. Yes, it is rather a problem. I have only ten girls on the staff and I should have at least sixteen. That means we all have to work very hard. And, besides helping with the housework and the washing, I make a point of personally supervising all the cooking. I'm very particular about the food being hot. There's really nothing worse than warm food."

"Yes, I agree with you," I said. With inward amusement I recalled a passage in Margaret Halsey's *With Malice Towards Some*, where she states that in every English boarding-house there is a gang of "blowers-off" whose duty it is to stand outside the kitchen door and blow on the food as it comes out, in order to remove any traitorous vestige of warmth that may still be lurking in it. Evidently, Mrs. —, being short-staffed, did not employ any such gang.

"When I went away for my holiday I had only one really hot meal all the time," she said.

Not Many Holidays

"I suppose you can combine business and pleasure when on holiday by learning the methods of other boarding-houses?"

"Yes, but if you're in charge of a place like this you don't get many holidays. That was two years ago, and was the first for ten years."

"Then a landlady's life isn't all beer and skittles?"

"It certainly isn't. And it's an ungrateful business. You spend your life doing things for people and they don't appreciate it. Or rather some don't. I suppose in any boarding-house there are bound to be a few grumbles. But I'm really rather lucky. I have some very nice people here, and I try to run the place like a home rather than a hotel."

"A Little Community"

"I suppose there's quite a lot of social life?"

"Yes, we really are a little community here. The women have a knitting-bee meeting every Monday night. The boarders have lots of parties among themselves, too, of course. But the kitchen is really the social centre of the house. Everyone collects there at supper time and it's just like home."

"Don't you frown on parties? I thought all landladies did."

"No, I like my guests to feel free to enjoy themselves. There is a rule that visitors must leave at 11 p.m., but there are special dispensations for birthdays. Yes, I admit that sometimes I have to come down on them rather hard. I don't like doing it, but I have to consider my other guests. That's where my husband has the advantage over me."

"Your husband?"

"Yes, we run it together. He manages the business side while I look after the domestic side. If there's any scolding to be done, however, it all falls on me." She laughed.

Landladies Prefer Gentlemen

"That's one rather desirable thing about keeping a boarding-house," I remarked. "It's a business that husband and wife can undertake jointly." I remembered a question I had been wanting to ask a landlady for some time—a question that vitally affects our sex. "Is it true?" I asked, "that landladies prefer men?"

Mrs. — agreed.

"Why?"

"Men are cleaner," said Mrs. —.



... A gang of "Blowers-off"

I bridled.

"Women leave lipstick and cold cream all over the towels and pillow-cases," she said. "It makes a lot more work."

"Yes, but they're tidier."

"I wouldn't say that," said Mrs. — darkly.

"And they eat less."

"You'd be surprised," said Mrs. —. I decided to change the subject. "Tell me, Mrs. —, what advice would you give to a woman starting out in the boarding-house business?"

"Feed them well. Give them good beds, good fires, but especially good meals, and they'll never leave you."



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