

DOES MARAMA WANT A GIRL?

TO aspire to a household servant, let alone employ one, is all but unforgivable in a land dedicated to the principles of social service; and principles aside, his or her wages would have to be on a scale prohibitive to all but the recipient of a really sizeable income. For we've come a long way since Grandmother's hired help drew her ten shillings or so each week. Who'd want to shoulder the burden of somebody else's home drudgery rather than condescend to accept one of those pleas for unskilled labour on the "Situations Vacant" page—"Young lady, for light and interesting work in our model factory; lunch provided in your own cafeteria; all fares paid to and from work; eight pounds a week?" Yes, domestic service is out of fashion in New Zealand.

There are islands to northwards, though, where even a New Zealander must come to terms with his conscience over employing help in the home. The heat and humidity of Melanesia are such as to make life something less than tolerable in the absence of a servant to cook, wash and generally keep things in order. Availability of labour is no problem. Plenty of village boys and girls, all of them blissfully unaware of the existence of model factories or of gleaming cafeterias, are eager for household employment; and Grandmother wouldn't have had to stretch that ten shillings a week very much. My wife and I are stationed at Suva, where the recognised wage for a Fijian girl not living on the premises is about three guineas sterling a month. Over and above her wages, you also provide her with food—*dalo* (taro) and other starchy vegetables, *kai* (shellfish) and kitchen left-overs. It sounds pretty good for 1953, doesn't it?

Well, over the past year we've employed a succession of four Fijian girls. Average age twenty, appearance and cleanliness reasonable, and honesty (other than where food is concerned) beyond reproach. Sarah (most of them prefer to use a non-Fijian name, often one of Biblical origin) was the first. She was cheap at the price, for her thirteen-year-old brother Simone (the men usually either give a Fijian flavour to an introduced name or retain their native one) came, too. While Sarah drew the pay, Simone accomplished an increasing percentage of the work. On the whole, our first girl was a cheerful sort. She spoke and understood English whenever it suited her, and was kind to her parents and relatives. Just how kind, we soon found out to our cost. It was pleasant to hear those beautifully harmonised Fijian melodies drifting from the general direction of the kitchen—until we noticed that our food stocks were becoming exhausted at a more and more incredible rate.

Came the evening when Sarah slapped down cold soup and light amber coffee as the sum total of our dinner. I can still see the hurt surprise in the eyes of Father and an imposing representation of the tribe as they were banished into the night, leaving half-finished plates of our nicely-prepared roast of mutton behind them. We gave Sarah one more chance, but then she took to having longer and longer morning naps sprawled full-length on the living-room floor. On the day when she objected to

Even in Melanesia, where labour is plentiful, says MARSHALL LAIRD, help in the home brings its own peculiar problems

being disturbed by our setting our own table for lunch we tasted, for the first time, the undemocratic sense of power that accompanies the dismissal of a servant.

Next morning, Simone arrived with Esther in tow. This, he announced, was his truly-truly sister. Sarah, it appeared, had been merely a member of his kinship group. Fijian family relationships have their complications. By lunchtime, the flat positively shone. Furniture had been rearranged, the whole place was

turns to work at all after the Christmas festivities in her home village, two weeks of sulkiness was as much as we could stand. Finally came a day which began for us with an Indian boy banging on the back door and shouting for Esther at 5.0 a.m., and our erstwhile model servant followed in Sarah's footsteps.

By the end of the first girl-less week, we were almost ready to scour Suva to locate Esther and coax her back again. It was at this stage that Ruthie (part



"A formal request to be paid only eight shillings a week in future"

spotless, bowls of hibiscus were everywhere, and an excellent curry awaited us. Esther's English was good, too. In one of her earlier discourses on the shortcomings of other girls, we heard that an extension of Sarah's hospitality beyond the family circle had inspired her ultimate lethargy.

ESTHER'S stay lasted for five months.

For the first four of these her performance left nothing to be desired. She dressed well, too, in the rather Edwardian fashion of Fijian girls. It appeared that she patronised the same Indian tailor as did my wife, and new dress began to follow upon new dress at a rate altogether out of keeping with her wages. In time we learned the reason. Esther was no more moral than her predecessor, only she combined commerce with care. However, her virtue was none of our business. While she kept up her standards in the flat we carried on her pay during our visits to other islands, bought her little extras and even advanced her wages by ten shillings a month.

All to no avail. It was a changed Esther who came grumpily back several days late from her Christmas leave. Although you have, it appears, to consider yourself lucky if your girl re-

Tongan) arrived. Ruthie had a baby and the distinction of actually having been married, but had never done housework before. Her first contribution towards our welfare was to wash the dinner dishes and proceed to stack them neatly in a big white cupboard having plenty of vacant shelf-room—this happened to be the refrigerator. She spent most of the remainder of the week sitting in the kitchen, stuffing herself with food and watching my wife work. Perhaps this became boring, or else she began to be concerned about her figure, for one morning she went to the market and forgot to come back.

NEVER again, we decided; in future, we'll look after ourselves. After a couple of weeks of doing so, and when just verging on homicide, Rebecca entered our lives. A pleasant part-Solomon Islander, she brought us up to date on the activities of our earlier girls. Esther, it transpired, was now a further candidate for unmarried motherhood—and for the record, was also of part Solomon stock. Her child will be half Indian. We began to have qualms for the ethnic purity of the Fijian people.

After a fortnight, Rebecca is still with us. Although her cooking abilities are limited she can chop wood for the

kitchen range quite successfully, and like most of the local girls has a positive flair for washing and ironing and the arranging of flower vases. True, we sometimes have to get our own breakfasts, and Rebecca arranges days off from time to time without bothering to consult us. Still, she hasn't so far displayed any of the more objectionable tendencies, such as blowing her nose on the tea-towels, that one is always liable to encounter; and even though, Christmas and Easter now being well behind us, other young ladies are beginning to appear at the back door to enquire whether the Marama wants a girl, we could do a lot worse than stick to Rebecca. So stick to her we will, until the apparently inevitable decline sets in.

THE thing that we've missed most among these girls has been the display of any kind of deep-seated attachment, either to a job that's an easy one as Suva jobs go or to us personally. This doesn't seem to be merely a factor of the relatively short periods of employment involved, for easily our most devoted servant to date was an old murderess who worked for us for a month in the New Hebrides. Our verbal exchanges with her were enlivened by the necessity of speaking in beach-la-mar, the local version of pidgin. Katua had served a five-year sentence in the capital of the New Hebrides, Vila, for killing her husband with a bush knife. ("Him cross cross along me plenty too much, me killum dead finish.")

She was seldom without her bush knife—we often wondered whether this was the fatal instrument itself. Its uses encompassed everything from preparing meals to cutting the grass round our house. One has to admit that she wasn't basically as intelligent as the Fijian girls, but her will to work and desire to please was unquestioned; and when we packed up to return to Suva there were perfectly genuine tears trickling down Katua's leathery old face.

This account must not be allowed to close without a mention of Krishna, our Indian garden boy (a bow-legged little man in his middle forties), who works for us for one day a week. He prunes, mows, weeds, turns his hand to any odd jobs that are offering, and in every way earned the ten shillings a visit which we paid him to start with. As Krishna knows no English whatsoever, and we stand in utter ignorance of Hindustani, our communications have, with one exception, been by sign language only. The exception, in an era of rising wages, was something of a phenomenon. A few weeks ago he arrived flourishing a grimy sheet of paper on which a letter-writer had inscribed his formal request to be paid only eight shillings a week in future!

One of these days we'll be going back home to New Zealand. Although we now feel quite up to tempering democratic principles with the positive advantages to be derived from employing help in the home, the economics of the situation are such that failing a doubling of scientific salaries and the abandonment of direct taxation my wife will return to the kitchen and wash-house while I attend to the garden—if, that is, we can afford a home at all. Granting the latter contingency, if anyone back there feels able to combine Fijian availability with Katua's loyalty and Krishna's attitude to the wage situation, he or she has got him—or herself a job.