Woman's Place

By MARY ALDEN HOPKINS

A woman, keenly interested in the well-being of children, approached a legislator to ask his support of a bill concerning medical examination of school children. The delicate susceptibility of the legislator was outraged by the unwomanliness of her "lobbying." He rebuked her sternly for meddling in politics, ending with the impressive words: "Madam, a good woman stays at home to take care of her children."

The woman withdrew, somewhat puzzled. The compulsory education law took her children out of her home to put them in a schoolroom, and too exalted idealism forbade her trying to influence school policies. As she thought about the matter, she decided that the puzzling contradiction lay in limiting "home" to the cubic space included between house walls, cellar and roof. It seemed to her that wherever her little children went she must go; that she must concern herself with all that touched her children's interests; that her "home" was really the entire city—the state—the country —perhaps the whole world.

Here are two incidents that confirmed her in her decision:

The water supply of Fairholm was contaminated by the sewage from the towns up the river. Typhoid fever floated leisurely down with the current, pausing for its handful of lives from each town. The city council said decisively that the city could not build a filter plant without increased taxation. At the words "increased taxation" the majority of the men assured their wives that the best method was to boil the water. They squelched wifely discussion by remarks like, "My dear, if you want a new filter plant you must change our state constitution on the bonded indebtedness of third-class cities."

That sounded more like politics than like woman's concerns, and the housewives set to boiling. Mrs. Homer, among others, boiled water to drink, water for bathing "above the neck," water for washing vegetables; and scalded her hands along with the dishes. She forbade the children's tasting water outside the house. Disobedient Jimmy on the baseball field drank water from a tin bucket—without getting the fever; Janet sipped dubious drinks at the ice-cream emporium—likewise without harm; while little Josie, despite hours of conscientious thirst, got the fever from milk in her own blue china mug. The cow's drinking water had not been boiled. The mothers of Fairholm had not attacked the source of danger, because of their narrow definition of "home."

Mrs. Roscoe canceled her subscription to a certain magazine because it

contained too many articles on tragic conditions among city working women. Said Mrs. Roscoe: "If I bring up my own five children well in my own home I can be excused from worrying about sweatshops five hundred miles away." But the dinky little winter coat she bought for Bobby had sewed into its well-finished seams some slivers of scarlet-fever skin. The manufacturer had found it cheaper to send his work out into tenements for "finishing," and no city has adequate official inspection of tenement-house sweatshops.

Story after story could be told of food contaminated before it entered the house; bread handled warm by a scrofulous baker; shiny red apples sold to school children by a vender with a loathsome disease; food on which flies had tramped; and adulterated raw material. What does it profit a cook to fight vermin in her own cellar if the state inspection of slaughter houses is lax, the bakeshops unsanitary and street selling unsupervised?

It is a mother's business to buy warm clothing, but the amount of wool in baby's 25-cent shirt is determined by the tariff. Nursery hygiene is written in "Schedule K."

More and more each year the initial processes of manufacturing food and clothes slip out of the hands of mothers into the hands of men whose first interest is money-making. From yeast and soap to Ray's stockings and Dorothy's bon-bons, articles come ready-made into the house. Yet the children's welfare still depends upon the wholesomeness of their food and the warmth of their clothes.

What is the mother to do about it? Does her interest in the food begin only as it comes up the back steps? Has she no responsibility for fire-trap buildings, uncensored moving pictures, unkempt parks and dirty streets, because these matters have moved into "politics"—are even election issues whereby candidates stand or fall?

Some mothers say that, since a new method of production has come about, mothers must learn to understand that method. They say that municipal housekeeping is not so very different from family housekeeping. They say that, after all, the nation is simply an overgrown family, and that, just as a complete family group must have both father and mother, so the nation needs both father care and mother care.—From "Boundaries of Home," in The Congregationalist.

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