

THE NEGRO WORKING WOMAN

WHAT SHE FACES IN MAKING A LIVING

BY MARY LOUISE WILLIAMS



My working career started a few years back in a small city in New York State, with a high school education. After graduation, being filled with the enthusiasm of youth, I naturally turned my thoughts to "something different."

I applied to several offices for employment, seeking even as inferior a position as addressing envelopes. At every place I met with disappointment. None felt they could use colored help in that capacity.

By this time I felt somewhat like a peacock who had looked at his feet. Now, I worked around at odd jobs and housework until one day I received a surprise.

Through the kind intercession of the Vice President of a manufactory I was given an opportunity in its pertinence department. I was to act as forklady and stock clerk. I made good. The management, being so well pleased, doubled my salary after a year's service. No question of color ever arose. In the course of a few more months I was walking home with a co-worker and met my mother. Naturally I was proud of her and wanted my friends to meet her. At the corner, as had been our habit, we separated. Next morning I was summoned to the office. You can imagine my surprise upon finding my services were no longer needed. Mr. Vice-President softened it as best he could: "There is no fault with your work, but the girls will not work with a Negro. We would gladly keep you if we could, but it is better to lose one girl than to lose twenty."

On another occasion I answered an advertisement in the paper worded thus: "Wanted: a young colored girl, high school graduate preferred. Apply Day's Department Store." I dressed with care expecting to find at least a saleslady's opening. Just picture for yourself my chagrin upon learning they desired a bootblack in the ladies' rest room! The reason they wanted an educated girl was to keep their wealthy customers from coming in contact with objectionable Negroes. I had no chance to refuse the job because Mr. T. said I looked too much like a Caucasian and he could not use me. He finally hired a high school graduate who had trained two years for a teacher. Is it not a pity that a colored girl must be educated to qualify as a bootblack?

Finding no real openings for me in the clerical line, I turned my attention to shop work. I did this for three reasons. First, it gave me more time for myself than housework. Second, I received a more liberal reward per hour for my services. Third, it placed me on a more equal basis with the other workers although I needed no education other than to read and write. At this work I made just enough money to make both ends meet and sometimes I had to stretch pretty hard to do so, especially when we had a holiday. Naturally I received a little less pay than the white workers. The difference in pay was due possibly to the open shop. In this city there is no colored garment workers' union and the white unions do

not take the Negro in. In the shops the Negro has no chance of advancement.

I heard so much about Cleveland. I went there and found conditions more favorable, due probably to the fact that the Negro himself was more enterprising. Here I found a Negro Vaudeville employing all Negro help. There were also colored doctors, lawyers, clubs, hotels, rooming houses, ice cream parlors, drug stores, and restaurants. These were all using colored help. The Phyllis Wheatly Home and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People took an active part in placing girls in suitable positions. Still there were many girls unplaced for.

I happened to be one of these and took a job to wash glasses and silver in a white hotel. I found hotel conditions here very much as they were at home. Though we ate the same food as the whites, we ate at the dishwashers' table, men and women eating together. Here I worked nine hours a day for forty dollars a month. Out of this I paid carfare twice a day, for one meal a day, four dollars a week for a room, and one dollar for laundry. This left me very little for the pleasures of life. I was about discouraged when the assistant steward was taken up in the draft. After this the head steward had quite a job to keep this place filled. So I braved the lion in his den and the result was I became the assistant. It was really a man's job. I had to take care of the storeroom and coolers, also to keep track of the cost of keeping up the various parts of the hotel. I probably would be there yet only peace was declared and with it came the return of the former assistant steward. This position afforded me so many luxuries of life that it showed me what a joy work would be to the Negro woman if given a position and salary instead of a job and wages.

Being a little homesick I returned. Somehow I expected to see conditions changed. With the exception of a few elevator operators, girls to dust china and furniture, two or three girls to rearrange stock behind white salesladies, and a few more women working in shops, I found no change. Oh, yes, I found three women working as salesladies, but as these were "passing" they mean less than nothing in the history of the Negro Woman.

Not being able to find anything that pleased me I turned my attention to canvassing. Even now I feel a loathing for this work. If I called at the front door I was directed to the rear. In many instances the door was shut in my face before I could make my errand known. Others treated me well, but that expression of incredulity upon seeing a Negro agent spoke louder than words. Some business men would give me an audience, sometimes with an order. Others received me with so much attention I felt they thought my magazines were only a camouflage.

And since there is a general tendency to expand the field of her operations, manual and mental, let us say with Longfellow:

"Out of the shadow of night
The world moves into light,
It is daybreak everywhere!"