When are you going to change the maidservant, darling?

Hiring and firing maidservants was like making or breaking ministries. It was just a coincidence that whenever she sacked a maid, there was a change of ministry either at the Centre or in one of the States. ■ **by D. P. Sabharwal**

MY FIRST day in the new office in a higher position was so satisfying and full of promise that happiness was writ large on my face. So, when I reached home, I expected my wife to notice it and ask me 100 questions. However, nothing of that sort happened.

On the other hand, I could find her face glowing. She was radiating exuberance and happiness. Yet, I knew that her joy and glee wasn't a reflection of my own happy face. It had to be due to some other reason. And whatever it was, I was sure, was going to surface very soon. And it did.

While I was changing, she said, "I have very good news. Can you guess what it is?"

But even before I could nod my head, she added, "I got 4 maidservants today."

Now, that was really good news, because we had moved into a 4th floor flat where use of lifts by servants was prohibited. No servant was willing to work in such houses. The news was all the more heartening in view of the briefing we had got prior to our departure from Pune and the hints we had received on arriving in Delhi that "getting a maidservant was as difficult as getting into a long-distance train without reservation."

"I must say you are really lucky. As lucky as the man who was thrown into the sea but came up with a fish in his mouth."

"You call it luck?" she asked exasperatedly and after a long gap said, "No, it is no luck. In fact I am caught in a dilemma and it is more serious than the one faced by a mother who said: 'One of my daughters is mad at me because I won't let her wear a bra yet, and the other is mad because I won't let her throw hers away'," she said.

"I don't see any link between the 2 situations. Anyway, what is your problem?" I asked.

"I am not able to decide which one to employ because they span the whole spectrum and represent different shades and colours," she said.

"In that case employ the prettiest one."

"Stop joking," she reprimanded me. "It is all so confusing. One of them wants a full-time job, another is available from morning till evening, the 3rd will work part-time and the 4th will be available for one shift only.

"So, you see, that is my problem, and I want your help in this. Tell me, please, which one should I employ?"

"Look, dear, this is your department and I don't want to say anything," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"I had read somewhere that there are men who would even be afraid to commit themselves on the doctrine that castor oil is a laxative. Today it is confirmed that you are one of them," she said sarcastically.

"Whatever you may say, I am not going to offer any advice because if things go wrong and you become dissatisfied with the servant at a future date, I will have to listen to your grumbles, grunts and probable fireworks," I said. "All I

"...Out of the four, you employ the prettiest one," I said.



want to say is: Don't be in a hurry. Think over the issue and then take a decision."

She accepted my advice and after careful evaluation, employed one of the 4 maidservants who had approached her.

All this happened a long time ago. Since then, a lot of water has flowed down the Ganga. And on the home front too, many changes have taken place as far as maidservants are concerned. Well, to be precise, 6 within a space of 7 months.

When she hinted at changing the incumbent one too, I said, "You are really lucky that hiring-and-firing of servants is not governed by any rules and regulations, otherwise you would have had to pay each one 3 months' salary for throwing them out without any notice."

"On the contrary, I would be happy in such a situation because then these maidservants too would be answerable. Now one does not have any check or control over them. You know how they behave," she said dejectedly.

I WAS in full agreement with her. Each maidservant she had employed was a law unto herself. The first one was regularly irregular. In addition, she never turned up and helped my wife whenever we invited someone to dinner. What is more, to avoid washing additional utensils she used to absent herself next day also.

The second one was too moody. She had to be served breakfast and tea at a particular time. She also demanded to be spoken to in a particularly sweet tone. Any deviation from these norms meant her getting disturbed and jittery. And the result invariably was broken crockery. And on such occasions her stock reply used to be, "It just slipped out of my hands."

The 3rd one was very neat and clean and used to bring one of her offspring to help her. However, within a few days, she hinted that to keep her tidy and well-dressed was the employer's responsibility. Since, my wife liked her as well as her work, she was given a sari and a few blouses. And that opened the proverbial Pandora's Box.

Over the next week, everyday she brought one of her children and requested "memsahib" to give some clothes to him or her as well. When my wife could not oblige her since we did not have 7 kids to match hers, she started demanding some money. And when this was refused, she would ask for a glass of rice, or a cup of sugar or anything else for that matter. Well, my wife just could not cope with her. Thus another change became inevitable.



"In this bad weather you did not give me tea, mem sahib, so this dinner plate just slipped out of my hand..."

As for the next one, her work was awfully bad. She believed in leaving a thing where it belonged and never removed it. Well, it could be cleaning powder on utensils or soap in clothes or dust on furniture or dirt in the corners of the rooms.

To put it briefly, my wife had problems with each servant. Now it is not that only we had a rough time. The story was virtually the same in every flat in our locality. Thus at any and every gathering the topic of discussion was always maidservants.

The news media might be going berserk at the final outcome of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, or R. K. banner's latest release *Henna* or the *Perestroika* of Gorbachev, but the ladies always had a horse to flog, a horse which, despite all the flogging it received, was always alive to get some more.

However, despite all the talk, no effective solution could be found. Maidservants continued to be changed in every household.

Fed up with telling each servant what to do and what not to do, my wife decided to put an end to this agonising process. One evening, as I returned from office, she announced, "No more servants hereafter. I will do everything myself."

"Look dear, that is not practical," I said.

"Why not?" she countered and added, "I am aware that my workload will increase tremendously. But the pain that is going to accrue from this will definitely be less than the one I am getting presently from these servants."

I WAS impressed by her determination. As I thought over her resolution, I felt convinced that it was a good idea. Agreed, it was not the ideal solution to the problem, but with slight changes it could be made workable.

Thus, after a lot of discussion, both heated as well as sensible, we agreed on the dictatorial part of her statement that "No more servants hereafter." But the second part of the same statement—"I will do everything myself—underwent a major surgery. It was decided that we will share the work.

As a result, kids were entrusted with

AROUND THE WORLD

A cock in Paraguay, sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment for pecking at the next-door neighbours' children, has been released from jail.

Newspaper reports said the cock's owner, Ceciliu Arevalus, had trained the fiery rooster to make forays into his neighbours' garden and attack their small children. Arevalus had quarrelled with the neighbours, who eventually captured the bird and turned it over to the police.

The police ruled that the bird was guilty of menacing behaviour and locked it up, but after complaints by a local animal protection society, a district judge ordered its release.

* * *

Drawings of skulls and stories of smokers who died will be printed on cigarette cartons next year, an official of the Swedish National Board of Health and Family Welfare said. "It's difficult to transform science into intelligible language to make people understand the health hazards of tobacco."

The board is the government's policy-making body on a wide range of social issues.

* * *

Japan's annual "exam hell" for college applicants proved fatal to one high school student.

18-year-old Yoichi Mochizuki of Chiba Prefecture, east of Tokyo, collapsed while taking a university entrance exam in mathematics and died a short while later at a local hospital, the daily *Yomiuri* reported. The cause of his death was determined to be heart failure.

In competing for spots at top universities, which hold the key to entering government or big business, Japanese students often study to the point of exhaustion. Mochizuki was the first student to die while taking the entrance exam.

* * *

French authorities have refused to register a baby called Saddam despite protests from its Muslim parents.

France had sent troops to the Gulf after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait, and French authorities felt the use of Saddam's name was dishonour to French troops who risked their lives in the Gulf.

* * *

A South Korean sailor Lim Kang Yong, 28, fell off his ship, grabbed a passing turtle and hung on for dear life until he was rescued 6 hours later.

The sailor fell on the slippery deck of the *May Star*, a South Korean ship, at dawn and tumbled into the Bay of Bengal about 130 km south of Chittagong. Waves swept him away.

Lim's crewmates said they spotted him 6 hours later on the back of a turtle. They used a crane fitted with a fishing net to pull Lim and the turtle from the sea.

"The turtle was very friendly. It did not hurt me at all," Lim said after reaching Chittagong port. "I learned from books that a turtle will keep floating if you ride on it holding its neck tight."

The ship's crew rewarded the turtle with a meal of meat and bananas before returning it to the sea.

* * *

A French doctor has found a way to stop those ungracious sounds many people make in their sleep. While operating on patients for chronic and severe throat infection with a carbon dioxide laser, Dr Yves Victor Kamami discovered that his patients not only bade goodbye to sore throats but also to their snores. "I realised that by using the laser to reduce the infected tonsil's volume, I re-established the air passage between the 'pillars' before the tonsils," the ENT specialist at the Foch Hospital in Sureshnes said. He said in 80% of the cases snoring had vanished.

* * *

Wealthy Japanese couples are hiring American women as surrogate mothers for offspring they cannot themselves have naturally. The American women, whose wombs were rented, were impregnated through artificial insemination.

Given the Japanese craze to change their Mongoloid facial features through costly plastic surgery, surrogate mothering can develop into a trans-Pacific big business if it can even partially alter physiognomy. □□

the task of dusting and keeping their room tidy. I started helping her with the washing machine on holidays. We also started washing cups and glasses immediately after we took water, milk or tea. She was also given help in cutting and peeling vegetables.

But all this didn't help her a bit. Within a short time, she was as fed up with all 3 of us as she used to be with maidservants. When I asked her the reason, she said, "Your work is both shabby and shoddy. And you people have started breaking cups, glasses and plates as if we are getting them free. And the worst part is that I can neither shout at you nor deduct any money..."

Before she could complete the sentence, I burst out laughing. But the next moment I realised my folly and stopped abruptly. Then with a serious face, I made an honest suggestion to her, "Look, darling, good or bad, any ayah is better than us. So employ one immediately and start feeling slightly better."

SHE accepted my suggestion without any discussion and a maidservant was hired next day. It is a different matter that she was fired a week later. Ever since, this process of hiring-and-firing has become a continuous process.

In fact, it is like the making and breaking of ministries. Perhaps, it is a coincidence that whenever she has changed the maidservant, it has been preceded or followed by a change of government either at the Centre or in one of the State capitals.

Then it happened the other day. Early in the morning, while handing me the newspaper, my elder son read out the headlines. "Iraqi Scud missiles hit Israel again; Pawar submits resignation to the party President."

Immediately my younger son yelled, "Papa, count for how many days has the present maidservant worked and also calculate the amount to be paid to her. She is sure to get the sack today."

"No, I am not going to change her as yet," came the resolute announcement from the kitchen.

"In that case I am sure Pawar is going to remain in the saddle for some more time," opined my elder son.

The next day's paper confirmed his prediction and that day I learnt one more thing in my life: That politicians' future is really governed and controlled by ordinary people. □□

● *The government that gives too much costs too much.*