

THE ART OF FINDING FAULT

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IT may seem superfluous to begin by saying, "Don't find fault at all when you can possibly avoid it." Nevertheless, this is a very important first rule; for in order to make necessary fault-finding count, and be of any real use to yourself, to the delinquent individual, or to both, all needless, superfluous and aimless fault-finding must be avoided.

Three times out of four fault-finding is merely an expression of impatience, and the only good it does is to relieve the irritable feeling caused by the carelessness, stupidity or other defects of those with whom we have daily intercourse. To begin with, on every occasion where there is no reasonable hope of doing good by fault-finding, seal your lips as with a bar of iron.

Next, almost always postpone fault-finding until there has been time for consideration. Do not speak at the moment the fault has just been committed. However deserved, and even mild, the reproof may be, the culprit's mind is not in a state to receive and assimilate it. When Bridget has just broken your best India china soup-tureen, she is so disturbed by the accident that she hears you say, "Bridget, do you not remember I have often told you not to carry that tureen on a tray with other dishes, but always to lift it with both hands," etc., with a vague sense that you are "scolding" her, and it is very disagreeable; you are fortunate if she does not reply with some fretful self-justification. When the mind is off its balance, and the nerves agitated, it is not the moment to irritate still further. The more childish, undeveloped and ill-regulated the character the less is the hope of doing good by such a method.

To simplify the case I will suppose that you are dealing with domestics only. To treat the question of finding fault with children would involve too many side issues.

Here, then, I offer two very simple rules. I do not pretend that they cover the whole ground, but they will be of great practical assistance.

First—Never go into the kitchen to find fault with Bridget. She is there on her own ground; and if she is fretted into impertinence by what you say you have no resource but an undignified retreat, which leaves her mistress of the field. Send for her to come to you, taking care not to choose a time when her work or other occupations will be interrupted by so doing. Leave her a margin as to time.

Second—Begin by saying something kind, which will put Bridget in a good humor. It is easy to do this. Say a word of commendation of her breakfast cakes; or of her neat kitchen. She is now disposed to listen to you. Then go on something like this. "I like your work, on the whole, very much; you are (neat or a good cook, or very good tempered, as the case may be.) But there is one thing that troubles me. You stay out late at night. Now, if you were an elderly woman, perhaps it would not matter. At any rate, I should not feel responsible. But for a young girl of your age it is not safe. I should not dare to allow it. Your mother is not near you now to advise you; and a mother could not help being very anxious about you under these circumstances. You know I told you when you came that my rule is to have my domestics at home by (such an hour.) You may not understand the importance of this, but any older person, who has had experience, will tell you the same thing."

I have been obliged to suppose a case, but the principle is of varied application.

Good-natured, kindly fault-finding, administered when the mind is free to receive it, may do some good. Irritable expressions of displeasure, never; and moderate and just reproof, if tactless and ill-applied, is almost as useless.

There should be, however, a constant, gentle preparation of the soil, by judicious commendation. Judicious; not flattery, nor constant praise. Recognize all that is good; show that you perceive an attempt at improvement. With most people the tendency is the other way. Bridget burns her bread in the baking, and her mistress says, "Bridget, your bread was not good to-day." Bridget knows that; she knows, also, that she has made good bread ten times, and no notice was taken of it. The eleventh time she burned it, and that time she was blamed.

Let me close with a true anecdote. A kind-hearted old lady of my acquaintance employed a young colored man to do jobs about her premises. One day Henry, in receiving orders from her, forgot to remove his hat. My friend's old-fashioned breeding could not put up with this. This was the form of her reproof: "Henry, if you were my son, I should say, 'My son, where is your hat?'"