

THE EVOLUTION OF THE HIRED GIRL

BY HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

FIFTY years ago, throughout the regions where slavery did not obtain, when we relied for our domestic service on the children of the old freed slaves, on the needy among our country people, the complaint about servants was unheard. The women of the house, whatever their rank and wealth, aided largely in the conduct of affairs; and the young girls of small means, or of no means at all, graduated in regular order from the kitchen into marriage.

When immigration from Ireland began, life was still so simple that no one recognized the enormous changes which that immigration was about to bring. The sight of the pleasant old woman in her long cloak and her mob cap was like a journey to foreign lands, and we felt toward the sturdy peasant beside her as if he were a part of ancient history. But, from the company that trod upon the heels of these people, the housekeepers who before could not afford a servant could now procure a pair of hands for the drudgery at fifty cents a week. When this drudge became better accomplished she received seventy-five cents a week, and sometimes a dollar. Until some time after 1850 a dollar and a half a week was considered handsome wages. On this capital these servants imported a whole generation, as one might say, of young Irish girls and boys. They made an instance where the supply created the demand, instead of the demand creating the supply: for many individuals who had always done their own work found the possibility of having some one else to do it, and incontinently opened their kitchens to the procession of young persons that have been filing through them ever since. Meanwhile the young persons of our own nationality who had formerly done household work were released from the kitchens, and felt that they went one step higher in entering factories and shops. The daughters of the house, too, set free from domestic duties, had time for books and music and general cultivation, and a wave of culture has swept over the land in the path of these Irish girls that leaves us owing them an unpayable debt. It does not need that the culture should be of the deepest or highest; such as it is it is an advance in the direction of the deepest and highest, and in large measure it is a consequence of the leisure that the Irish immigration has made for us.

WITH the Civil War the wages of our servants rose with the price of all commodities. When gold was in the neighborhood of three hundred, and all values were trebled, and some, like that of cotton cloth, were many times multiplied, the house servants naturally felt that the dollar and a half was insufficient, and they presently demanded more. The value of the cotton cloth has fallen to its old standard; so has nearly everything that the maid has occasion to buy, while house rent, beef and many other things that the mistress must purchase, remain nearly at the war value. The wages of the maid, however, have not remained at the war rate, but have steadily advanced, so that an average cook often commands five dollars a week, and one of a superior sort, yet far below the rank of a chef, receives eight. This rise of wages, and its permanency, is again more or less in defiance of the law of supply and demand.

Perhaps we would not quarrel with the necessity of paying high wages if we remembered the service that the recipients of these wages have already rendered us, the character of the service which they now render to us daily, and the fact that after all it is but slight return for the perpetual preparation of food, the perpetual washing of dishes, and the sweeping, dusting and scouring by means of which home is made habitable, and leisure possible for our wives and daughters.

Indeed, when we recount to ourselves what our homes would be without their labors, so far from quarreling with the price paid them we feel like giving them an increase; and when we picture such a scene of desolation as the kitchen must present to a girl who descends to light the fire on a cold morning, we feel that the utmost consideration we can give her is not enough.

IT is not outside the part of this consideration for servant girls, nevertheless, that they should be subjected to certain restrictions; in relation to their goings and comings, the hours they must keep in order to do their work and yet preserve their health; in relation to their visitors, and their behavior, both out of regard to their own self-respect and to the rights of their employers.

Any person who employs servants can have those who will require few restrictions, and will give good measure of faithfulness, by exercising judgment in the selection in the first place, and by treating them properly afterward. Where no selection is possible, kindness and patience on the part of the mistress, respect shown to her and a life that exacts respect from her, will often make faithfulness and worth out of poor material. And it makes small difference in this connection whether one hires the picturesque colored girl, the sturdy Swede, the intelligent French, the silent German or one among the great throng of Irish girls. Whatever and whoever they are, they are girls away from home, in strange houses, among strange people, waiting upon other more fortunate young girls, and are often those who have left mother and motherland, and in many cases have nothing to be sure of in this country but their church. Where the effort is made to render the home a happy one, then the grateful and faithful heart of the servant girl is apt to make her approach that ideal standard of perfection which we have when we speak of the devoted servants in old foreign families, and in the households of our grandmothers in the third and fourth remove.

BETWEEN MISTRESS AND MAID

A Page of Suggestions by Experienced Housewives

WHO ARE OUR BEST SERVANTS?

BY MRS. LYMAN ABBOTT

INTO our homes we take thousands and thousands of young girls. We have them completely under our care; we order their sleeping, their eating; in a certain way what they shall wear, when they shall go out of the house, and when they shall have company. After a number of years of this training they go out to make homes of their own. What sort of homes do they make? By this time we should have trained a large number of home-keepers, and from their children we should have valued assistants to come back into our homes. Do we have such? If not, why not? We complain bitterly of the inefficiency of our servants and their lack of conscientious treatment of our time and our property, and yet many of these very people have been trained by those whom we trained. It is an old and almost too familiar saying that actions speak louder than words; but it is quite worth while for us to apply the proverb to this subject. If we avoid doing everything that we can get another to do, if we are careless about putting our own things away, even though we insist upon another's doing it for us, shall we expect that other one to put her things away in order or to use her time and her property any better than we have used ours.

NEAR my home a very large apartment house has recently been built. For two years workmen were busy piling it, stone by stone, and adding all the modern improvements and decorations. A friend of mine who looked forward to occupying one of the apartments, explained the fact that she had decided not to take it, in this way. "I would not put my good Mary into such a miserable dark room to sleep, and into such a wretched kitchen to cook!" The misarrangement in these "flats" represents the thought in many of our homes regarding the servant. Any corner will do for her; any discarded bit of furniture will answer for her room.

Is it any wonder that a class so treated should begin to demand for themselves something better, and in making the demand should go as much too far in the direction of liberty as the mistresses have gone in the direction of restriction. I am not surprised that girls prefer factory work, which gives them a measure of independence a part of the time, even though they must spend those independent hours in a meagre attic room, and must eat scanty food. Their crust eaten in independence is sweeter than the refuse of our richer tables, eaten in abject dependence. Of course, this is not the ordinary way we mistresses look at this matter. We consider our servants favored. We take into our homes, as a rule, those who are less intelligent, less educated than we are; we expect them to be exquisitely honest, to understand the distinctions of *meum* and *tuum* better than our neighbors do. We expect them to see life wholly through our eyes; to be devoted to our children, and to receive with gratitude the wages we pay, the food we choose to give them, and the corner of the house we set apart for them. Are we quite fair?

IT is difficult to say from which of our several nationalities the best servants come. In a house where the family is very regular, the orderly and ambitious Swede is, perhaps, the best. Where there is much drudgery the sturdy German may be best. Where the household is necessarily irregular, where the young people are coming home from school after the ordinary noon meal, where the house-mother in her cares needs the sympathies of her maid-servant, the warm-hearted Irish girl cannot be surpassed.

For qualities of loyalty and conscientious attention to duty the Scotch cannot be exceeded. So far as my experience goes, they are specially good in places of trust. Many persons much prefer colored servants, and if they become attached to the family their faithfulness and devotion may atone for their lack of ability to assume responsibility.

But in each case the treatment must be according to the disposition. If you expect from the mercurial Irish girl cordial acceptance of a great burden of work at one time you must be ready to give her a little outing occasionally, and must take an interest in her burdens when they come. I find it much better to take my servants into a sort of partnership. I talk with them about the work to be done, as far as possible letting them understand the circumstances which call for the extra work. I let them know my guests, and try to secure their interest in making my guests happy. And I find that the plan works well.

If homes are to be treated as machines, each member of the household only a cog in the great wheel, then the servant is to take her own place, and to have only that share in the running of the machine which her special bit should take. When such is the case, and order and system are the rule, when all is well lubricated, the end of such a mechanical home is served. The mistress who expects her maid to be ready with cheerfulness to do any extra piece of work, to show sympathy in sickness, to give up her own pleasures, must be ready to care for her maid in her sickness, to give up sometimes her own pleasures that the maid may have an outing, and must teach her children that consideration and kindness are always to be shown to those who serve them. Whatever be the nationality from which our domestics come, we must not forget that we are all of one family, and One is our Father.

UNTRUTHFULNESS OF SERVANTS

BY HELEN S. CONANT

MARY, if anybody calls I am out." These words were spoken recently in my hearing; spoken, too, by sweet lips, lips that would have proudly scorned to tell a lie. And yet this was a lie direct. We were sitting in my friend's cosy upstairs snugery, and she had just expressed a hope that no one would come to interrupt the confidential chat we were enjoying so much. "We will not be interrupted," she exclaimed. "Mary, if anybody calls I am out."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mary, very demurely, as she left the room.

"Was that right, my dear?" I said. "Do you expect Mary to be truthful to you when you teach her to lie for you?"

Of course there was no denying the fact that wrong had been done; wrong to Mary, the maid, wrong to the friend who might call to be turned away with a lie, and wrong to the sweet youthful lips which had spoken the thoughtless and untruthful words. Still my friend tried to justify herself.

"Everybody does it. I am told constantly that people are out when I know they are at home," she said.

Now, the fact that everybody does a thing never made wrong right. In this case, however, everybody does not do it. A thoughtful, honorable woman has too much respect for herself, and too much care for her servants to stoop to such a falsehood. We do not always stop to think of the power of example, nor of how closely we are watched by those whose opportunities for pure moral development have been much less than our own.

TRUTHFULNESS is a necessary quality in a servant. Misdeeds are forgiven and forgotten when they are frankly confessed. We are sorry for the broken dish when the maid comes to us with the pieces in her hand, but we rejoice in the feeling of confidence it gives us that we are receiving faithful if not always careful service; but it is different when we find the pieces hid away at the back of a high shelf, or discover them by accident in the ash-barrel. A mistress who will deliberately instruct her maid to tell a lie cannot expect to know the truth of what goes on in her kitchen, and if she does not, she is in a large measure to blame for it, for in telling falsehoods herself she loses the respect of her servant, and a mistress who is not respected will never be well served, neither can she exert a good influence upon those humble workers who, for the time being, are members of her household, as it is her duty to do.

I have been a housekeeper for thirty years, and it is not theory but experience that leads me to say that many failings of the maids in the kitchen spring from the failings of the mistress. There are bad servants, as every housekeeper knows, with failings of their own, often inherited from or developed by former mistresses, but so deeply rooted that the most judicious treatment fails to overcome them. On the other hand, there are many young girls fresh from the old country who have good inclinations, and who can easily be made truthful, and honest, and upright, if the mistress will set the example by always holding herself quiet, and kind, and firm, and truthful, as a true lady should. We are too careless before our servants. We allow them to see our weaknesses, our little ebullitions of temper, our petty subterfuges.

THERE is one household which I have watched many years where trouble with servants is unknown. I cannot believe that good girls always come to that particular mistress. That she is judicious in choosing those who shall enter her household I do not doubt, but that alone is not enough to secure the domestic peace which always reigns within her doors. Her servants remain with her for years, and they serve her well and faithfully because she secures their respect and their affection. The discipline of that household is perfect. A firm, sweet woman's hand touches every detail, and a kind and true woman's heart smoothes the rough places and settles all the little differences. There is no need to say that this mistress never teaches her maid to tell an untruth. If she is obliged to refuse herself to a friend, she sends a message which is true, accompanied by some sweet word of regret, which is sure to be pleasantly received.

Every lady has a right to refuse herself to friends when sickness, weariness, or some domestic duty makes it difficult, impossible, perhaps, to be at the time a gracious and courteous hostess. The message of refusal, however, can be so worded that no person of any common sense or judgment could feel offended. "Mrs. Brown is engaged," is abrupt and not to be recommended, although it may be the truth, but there are many ways of making it more gracious. "Mrs. Brown cannot receive to-day," is simple, truthful, and should offend no one, as, if the maid delivers the message at the door to each and all alike, it is evident that no slight is intended.

Many ladies now have one day in the week when they are "at home." This arrangement becomes necessary in large cities where one's circle of acquaintances is extensive and calling is a matter of ceremony. But the fact that a lady sets apart one day to receive friends is no excuse for instructing the maid to tell an untruth to those who, for some reason, call on another day, but it is a reason why those who call out of season have no right to be offended when they are told that "Mrs. Brown is not receiving."

RECOMMENDATION OF SERVANTS

BY CHRISTINE TERHUNE HERRICK

THE chief domestic problem of the age is conceded, by common consent, to be the servant question. It is second to no political subject in the thought that has been lavished upon it, the chapters and volumes that have been written about it, the conversations, discussions and lectures that have been suggested by it.

Within the limits of a magazine article it would be hopeless to attempt to touch upon more than a single phase of this burning topic of the time, but that one phase probably surpasses in importance any other. To put it in one sentence: What sort of references shall mistresses give servants?

Here, perhaps, someone may interpose with the query, "should any references be given?"

Yes, by all means.

For in the first place, it is unjust to refuse to the faithful, hard-working and efficient servant that which is her due, and which to her possesses a distinct money value. In the second place, the hope of obtaining a good recommendation acts as an incentive to the lame and lazy, and does valuable service by provoking to good works in cases where higher considerations would fail of results through a lack of appreciation. It is only when a mistress can say no good of a servant that she should positively refuse to give a reference.

This objection disposed-of, let us return to the original point.

WHAT sort of references shall mistresses give servants? First, let them be true. Women, otherwise honorable, have concerning this matter a perverted sense of right and wrong, a perversion that is, I dare to say, in seven cases out of ten, begotten of moral cowardice. The whimpering mistress feels the recoil natural to a refined woman from the torrent of abuse that would in all likelihood be her portion were she to write a reference stating as clearly the defects as the virtues of the departing Abigail.

In the other three cases of the ten a morbid and entirely ill-directed consideration for the servant inspires the woman, who will say only good of a faulty domestic, lest the latter lose the chance of a good situation. She fails to carry the result of her misplaced charity to its legitimate conclusion and to put herself in the place of the future mistress of the incompetent, ill-tempered, or dishonest help whose last employer lacked the courage to expose her in her true colors.

A housekeeper who was thus placed between the Scylla of injustice to a fellow housewife, and the Charybdis of justice to a dismissed servant, devised the expedient of telling, if not the whole truth, at least nothing but the truth. She had discharged her nurse for impertinence, laziness, and cruelty to a sick child. The reference the maid bore away with her was as follows:

"Mary Jones has lived as nurse with me for three months. I have found her neat, honest and sober."

Not a word of the temper, the industry, or the general competency of the maid for the place she had filled. No woman of any discernment would have engaged the girl for a nurse's position upon such a recommendation.

Undoubtedly, housekeepers should cultivate a loyalty to one another that would forbid them to falsify or disguise facts in the references they give servants. That they lack this loyalty is indicated by the adoption in most first-class intelligence offices of the plan of confidential references, wherein may be given by one employer, for the benefit of others, the unvarnished truth—a truth that often differs widely from the statements contained in the "recommend" furnished to the employés themselves.

In small places there may exist a danger that the refusal to give a laudatory reference would result in the boycotting of the offender. In large towns there can be no such risk. The only disagreeable result the veracious mistress would have to encounter would be the reproaches of the victim of her truth telling.

THE way of the reformer is no easier than that of the transgressor, and the pioneers in a movement for truthful references would probably have to endure the penalties of their courage and draw what consolation they could from the reflection that they were taking the first decisive steps toward forming a trades-union of housekeepers that might in time revolutionize domestic service in this country.

The servant would not be slow to learn that the price of a good reference is good behavior. Until this reform is fairly under way let the timid mistress, when in doubt, play her trump card of refusing to give any but a verbal reference.

Few maids will fail to be satisfied—or to feign satisfaction—with this mode of action. It gives the mistresses *in esse* and *in posse* a trifle more trouble, but the gain is worth the pains. Be it said to the credit of housekeepers that they are usually quite ready to be interviewed about servants, and that in most cases they will practice a veracity that is too often conspicuous by its absence from the ordinary written reference.

In spite of the introduction into many intelligence offices of the confidential references already alluded to, there are still offices where these are not demanded. There is little danger that, as some one has suggested, a lost reference might be found and used by some one who had no right to it. Such an occurrence, though possible, is highly improbable.

In every instance, the housekeeper who engages a servant should, write to the former employer to verify the reference. The unwritten laws of interdomestic etiquette demand this. When the reforms suggested in this little paper are an accomplished fact, the formality may be allowed to lapse.