

TRAINING-SCHOOLS FOR SERVANTS.



HERE are few grades of society, from the lodging-house keeper upwards, where the want of good servants is not felt; and continual is the complaint of the general deterioration of the class.

It is a perfectly obvious and melancholy fact that we have almost lost sight of the type of

real servant we knew in our youth—the respectable, tidy, simply-clad woman who filled that position now so often deemed menial. Undoubtedly, the education servants receive when young has much to account for in their future inefficiency. Why should not Board Schools include in the ground-work of their teaching such instruction as should tend to fit girls for the position of servant, and thus prepare the way for the work of the Training-School? They do not now teach them to be practically useful, nor certainly do the “Young Ladies’ Seminaries,” where more ambitious parents send their children (unless learning to play the piano after a fashion, or achieve marvellous feats of crochet and other fancy work, can be called education); at the best, any instruction they get is extremely desultory, and the exception rather than the rule is that they are trained for the business which is to become the profession of their lives.

The best teaching for young women servants is generally obtained in the houses of the nobility or gentry, where they are always under the immediate eye of the housekeeper—the only objection to this condition being that they learn to emulate the very false position of the race known as “upper servants.” These, from the housekeeper (in a large establishment), as well as those necessary but very odious personages, “my lady’s lady” and “my lord’s gentleman,” down to the head coachman and head housemaid—all those, in fact, who create the atmosphere of “high life below-stairs,” with their piano, cards, and dessert in the housekeeper’s room—have an utterly false position. There may be a possible and indirect compliment conveyed in so close an imitation of their master’s and mistress’s ways of life, but it very surely, though slowly, incapacitates them for their own spheres.

The example to the under servants is amongst the primary evils arising therefrom, and the low moral standard thus set up is one of the causes of deterioration in the quality of those still mounting the ladder of domestic promotion. A useless and costly dignity, and also a disinclination to oblige by diverging a hair’s-breadth from the line of what they call “their business,” forms so large and marked a part of the character of the modern upper servant, that it is not wonderful the ascending novices have to impose stringent conditions as to perquisites, entertainment of friends, going out, and hours of work when entering their first situation as a “single” or upper servant, so as to insure what are, to them, such important adjuncts to their position.

Any propositions for the amendment of the “servant difficulty” must be welcome to all, and I am glad to say that “daylight doth appear” in the form of a suggestion to provide training-schools for domestic servants, in the same way as there are schools for cookery, &c. &c., intended not so much for upper servants (though were the project a success it would be a pity to limit its usefulness to a minor grade of attendant) as for those most suitable to, and most required by, the upper middle classes of society, whose establishments do not always include a man-servant, and seldom more than two or three women domestics.

To this scheme there could be but few objections insurmountable, I think, by management and perseverance. Of course it would have to be a matter for future consideration whether the interests of the project could be best carried into effect by an association comprising a joint committee of ladies and gentlemen, or through the means of a company; at any rate, the advantages which would accrue from such an institution must surely be very great to the suffering public and housekeepers, as well as to the girls and women-pupils themselves.

The certainty of getting efficient domestics with guaranteed characters and of known proficiency would be of immense value, and to insure this none should be allowed to issue from the school without a paper of rules as to her service, to which she must put her name.

The establishment would undertake to train girls as young as sixteen and women not above forty—should any as old care to enter for instruction, which might occur in the case of sudden misfortune, where a woman is forced to earn her living, and prefers to do so as a servant. They would be under the supervision of a matron, who would use her judgment as to when they were fitted for service, and at any time they would be enabled to find a temporary home in the house when ill or out of work, which need never be long if they are efficient, and the demand for such as great as it is now.

Thus a safe home would be provided for many a lonely girl and unprotected female, a kind interest taken in her welfare, and a respectable livelihood guaranteed, on the simple conditions that she adheres conscientiously to certain fixed rules in the training of the establishment, as well as those of any house she afterwards enters. Once a member of the institution, a young woman may feel that its watchful eye is ever upon her, and its arms open to protect her, even through many changes of place; and this will also promote and strengthen the feeling that to reap such benefits depends entirely on her own conduct.

A few words are necessary about the paper of rules which each servant should receive on leaving the establishment for a situation. The class of work she professes to undertake should be clearly stated, also her length of service and previous character; then, in an accompanying blank form should be filled, as

occasion requires, her acceptance of the wages, rules, and services of the lady's house she enters, and this she must sign in the presence of the matron and lady, before leaving the school. The lady, on her side, must give a clear statement of her requirements, wages, service, and rules of her house, to the matron, who will fill in the blank form for the servant, the lady reserving to herself the right of waiving any one or more of the said rules by mutual agreement with her handmaiden; she will then also sign the paper, a copy of which will be kept by the matron, who will thus see that the servant's interests are neither lost sight of, nor left to the arbitrary mercy of a capricious person.

Again, amongst the many difficulties which beset the ordinary system of hiring servants, few are more prominently troublesome than the getting of a true character, whether by writing or personal interview with a previous employer.

I have heard it suggested as advisable to bring in the Irish system of written "discharges," or characters given to each servant when leaving. I would greatly deprecate such a plan as one of those who, having lived in Ireland, can best testify to its want of success through habitual abuse. It is the exception rather than the rule that the packet of dirty letters put into one's hand are not mostly forged; and when genuine, the exception rather than the rule that any one writer can be got at for further inquiries. Added to this, we know of many instances in which timid writers have been scared from giving a truthful character by the threat of prosecution on the part of a dismissed servant.

When a false "good character" is given of an unworthy servant, not only are the future employers put to much annoyance, and often expense, by the deception, but one more source of mischief and discomfort is let loose unchecked on society in the person of that domestic. On the other hand, when a servant receives a falsely bad character at the hands of a vindictive master or mistress, nothing can be more cruel nor reprehensible, for to them their character is their capital, their stock-in-trade, their only means of living—in fact, their everything. With it rest their only chances in life, which all will admit should not be at the arbitrary mercy of the capricious or vindictive. It is obviously, therefore, a gross injustice to both persons concerned when false characters are given, for the results are often disastrous.

I ought here to mention that reprehensible practice of demanding travelling expenses without the slightest intention of entering upon the situation applied for—

which can be met only by the employers declining to pay these until the servant is settled in the service. There should, again, be a further understanding that for the first three months of service the servant shall receive about 25 per cent. (or one-fourth) less than the stipulated wages, so that her disposition to remain may be fully tested, and her mistress have some safeguard against the expense and inconvenience of perpetual changes. All such matters as these could be dealt with by the training-school committee, and the outgoing pupils would see that rules of this kind would be the best protection of their own interests, by distinguishing them from the swarms of harpies who, by preying upon confiding employers, have made the domestic servant question a painful one indeed.

It is not on the highest classes of society that this evil falls personally the heaviest. Those who can afford to keep a housekeeper have the greatest of the daily worries lifted from their shoulders; but it is on the lady who is her own housekeeper—the master and mistress of the middle and upper middle class—who come into such close daily contact with the difficult servant nature.

To them, the hold that such a training establishment would have over the members of it would be extremely beneficial on the important score of characters; for each time they returned to the institution their papers would, so to speak, come under the critical inspection of the matron, who would very soon detect the false from the true in the report given, from her previous acquaintance with each individual's disposition. The knowledge, also, that such matters would be carefully looked into would act as a check upon careless or spiteful employers.

I think that a great deal of present discomfort and heart-burning on both sides might be averted by such a training-school for servants. Masters and mistresses would be delivered from the figurative "black mail" now levied on them by their domestics, in the shape of perquisites, entertainment of friends, going out, and hours of work; declining to take any who impose conditions other than those laid down by the establishment or the house they enter, and with all kindness and consideration for their needs and comfort, still remaining firm in insisting on the punctual performance of their duties; whilst servants would find increasing difficulty in securing places unless prepared to be faithful to their responsibilities, as house after house would be closed against the exacting, dishonest, and insubordinate.

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