



BY ELIZABETH L. BANKS, AUTHOR OF "CAMPAIGNS OF CURIOSITY."



I was in an evil hour that I accepted the proposition of my friend, Mrs. Brown, when she begged me to take charge of her South Kensington establishment while she accompanied her husband on a business trip to Paris. Mrs. Brown had a fault, or

perhaps I should say misfortune, of which I was always reminding her—she was a very poor housekeeper, and never able to manage her household as it seemed to me it should be managed. As a woman she was charming, and as a wife and mother she erred, if she erred at all, on the side of too much devotion to her husband and only child, a five-year-old boy, but her house was always at sixes and sevens, and she was continually engaging and dismissing servants. I attributed her troubles to a lack of tact, and I informed her that, not having been born with that quality in her disposition, she must cultivate it.

Then, one day, a few weeks ago, she suggested that I should add one more rôle to the many parts I had played in the drama of life, by acting for one month as her deputy housekeeper. She had just engaged a new staff of servants, and if I would take the responsibility of "breaking them in," she had no doubt that upon her return from Paris, she would be able to continue in the lines I had marked out for her. The cook and housemaid were two sisters from Yorkshire. I

thought such a relationship between the two principal servants would prove very advantageous. They would probably help each other and not quarrel. There was also a page-boy, aged fifteen, who, every afternoon, shone out resplendent in spotless cloth and highly-polished brass buttons. I rather liked the boy's looks. His eyes had an appearance of frankness and honesty about them. The fourth member of the staff was a meek-looking blue-eyed nurse.

On a certain Monday morning, accompanied by my poodle and my typewriter, my two inseparable companions, I took up my residence at Mrs. Brown's. As she and her husband drove away, I thought I saw a rather cynical smile on both their faces, but nothing daunted, I took up my new duties with every confidence that I should not only be the means of bringing about a beneficial change in my friend's household, but that I should also gain much information upon the subject of housekeeping that would benefit woman-kind.

I employed the morning in writing out on the typewriter lists of duties for each of the four servants, as well as a *menu* for the day's luncheon and dinner. I explained to the cook and the housemaid the easiest and quickest methods of doing their work, sent the nurse and Jack out for a morning constitutional, and afterwards settled down in the library to literary work. I did not anticipate any trouble so far as Jack was concerned. He was very fond of me, and one of those angelic-



looking boys with golden curls who never make mud pies or get their pinafores dirty.

In the beginning I started out with the theory that by devoting one hour each day to a personal supervision of the house, everything should run on smoothly. At the end of a week I thought an hour was too short a time, so I made it an hour and a half: after a fortnight, I discovered that even two hours were hardly sufficient, and at the end of three weeks I found that I had developed into what I had hitherto despised, a household "drudge."

My troubles began with an attempt to get the servants out of bed at six o'clock in the morning, an hour which I had always contended was the only proper one for rising among the working people. They had assured me that they were early risers, yet even a loud alarm clock, which I put in their room, failed to disturb them. There was but one way for me to accomplish my purpose, and that was by waking them myself. Then the matter of ordering the daily meals became at first a bugbear, and afterwards a terror. I insisted upon variety for breakfast, luncheon, and dinner. Mary, the cook, had informed me that although she was a "plain cook," she was willing to learn, so I undertook to teach her how to prepare various little dishes that were in great demand among my country people. But two weeks passed and Mary had not even learned to make "flannel cakes" or hot biscuit. I told her of twenty-six different ways to prepare potatoes, yet she still clung to plain boiled, mashed, fried, and baked. Then I gave up my efforts in despair.

About ten days after I had taken up my responsibilities a terrible calamity befell the household. It was the disappearance of the black cat, leaving behind her a family of four tabby kittens, who had but recently opened their eyes on the wide, wide world. This black cat was a great pet of Mrs. Brown's, for when a year before she had first walked into the hall one rainy night, strange and wet and hungry, she had been received as the harbinger of "good luck." She had not been a resident of the place more than a week when Mr. Brown made a successful "deal" in the City, so she had stayed on and fared sumptuously ever since. When she became a mother, she was left in undisturbed possession of her whole family of four, and when I first saw her in her satin-lined basket purring contentedly over them, I thought she was the most beautiful illustration of mother-love in animals that I had ever seen. Yet that cat was the means of turning me into a pessimist, and was the forerunner of great sorrow for me. One afternoon she failed to return from what we supposed was

her customary fifteen minutes' promenade. I sat up half the night waiting for her, and frequently put my head out of the window to call "Kitty, kitty, kitty," but the deserter did not return, and her kittens became orphans. The cook and the housemaid wrung their hands in despair, assuring me that just as the coming of a black cat meant good luck, so her disappearance was the omen of dire misfortune. And it was, for those kittens became the greatest of all my newly-assumed responsibilities. Jack's shrieks resounded through the house when it was suggested that we should drown them out of mercy. So I heated milk and gave it to them from an after-dinner coffee spoon. I discovered that they required feeding once in two hours, and not caring to make such frequent visits to the kitchen, I carried the basket to the library. As the days went on the kittens grew more troublesome. They were able to climb out of the basket and distribute themselves about the room in such profusion that I was in constant dread of stepping on them. While I fed one with the spoon, the remaining three scratched and bit my hands into shreds and patches. Jack's devotion to me became so marked and wearisome, that I regretted ever having won his love. His nurse was a mere figurehead. He came to me with all his troubles, and even insisted upon saying his prayers to me. I looked upon his angelic disposition as anything but a blessing, and I thought longingly of bad children I had known who ran away, made mud pies, and soiled their pinafores. One day I suggested to him that he should amuse himself in this way. He was so insulted that he went up to the nursery and remained there ten minutes. Then he returned to the kittens and amused himself by singing a hymn, which he composed as he went along.

Shortly afterwards his nurse went to bed with influenza, and I became not only nurse to Jack, but nurse to his nurse as well. The next day I paid a doctor's bill and cab fare, and sent the invalid to her mother, thus somewhat reducing the expenses of the household, for she was really of no service to me, and had an enormous appetite.

From that time on misfortunes seemed to fairly rain down upon me. One morning at breakfast Kate appeared to be on the verge of tears while she waited at table, and when she passed me the bacon she burst into violent sobbing. Finally she exclaimed—

"Oh, miss! Mary and I told you something would happen when the black cat went away, but we didn't know it would be for us, and it doesn't always mean death, either!"

"Has anyone died?" I asked.

"Yes, miss. Our cousin's little baby died



yesterday in Yorkshire, and the funeral is to-morrow."

I had expected to hear of the death of a nearer relative than that, and I was somewhat relieved. I wondered what would be the most appropriate thing to say to a young woman whose cousin's baby had died, but I could not think of anything. I asked if she and Mary were very fond of the baby.

"Well, miss," she answered, "we've never seen it. It was only six weeks old." She again burst out weeping. I felt very irritable that morning. My housekeeping annoyances were telling on my disposition. I was beginning to lose my sympathy for human kind, and there was every chance of my becoming a cynic.

"Now, look here, Kate," I exclaimed, "it is very foolish for you to take the matter to heart like that. The baby is very much better off. If it had lived, perhaps its mother would have deserted it, as the black cat did her kittens."

It was a heartless remark, and I had no sooner made it than I realised what an unfeeling wretch I had become. Surely that black cat was responsible for much mischief! Kate looked at me in amazement; then muttered something about "ladies who hadn't hearts," and joined her sister in the kitchen. Five minutes later Mary ascended to the dining-room to say she was sorry to leave me without anybody in their place; and then, to my astonishment, I learnt that the sisters were going to Yorkshire by the next train to comfort their bereaved cousin and attend the funeral. It was in vain that I attempted to argue them out of their determination, explaining that their duty was to the living more than to the dead. They could not be so persuaded. They would try to return the next week, they told me, and advised me to secure the services of a charwoman during their absence. They went to their room and arrayed themselves in the habiliments of mourning. When, at eleven o'clock, in black dresses, black

shawls, and crape veils, they chartered a hansom for King's Cross, they left me surrounded by unswept rooms, unwashed breakfast dishes, a dog, a child, and four kittens to look after, with only the help of a page-boy, who I had already found was more ornamental than useful. I immediately dispatched him for Mrs. Johnson, a charwoman who sometimes helped Mrs. Brown in just such emergencies as this. In an hour the page-boy returned with the information that Mrs. Johnson had got a place as temporary cook in a tradesman's family. I telegraphed to the registry office for assistance, but none came. As the day wore on, my despair increased. With the help of the boy I washed the dishes, made the beds, and swept the front hall. That day and the next I had the meals sent in from the nearest restaurant. Towards evening I sent the boy to his mother to inquire whether she would come and stay in the house until the return of Mr. and Mrs. Brown. The mother came to me, but I never saw the page-boy again. She thought the work was too hard for him, she said, and he was in the incipient stages of influenza. She had come only to collect his three weeks' wages, and not to render me any assistance. As I refused the wages, she relieved her mind by uttering imprecations against me; and then I was left monarch, indeed, of all I surveyed.



"WITH THE HELP OF THE BOY I WASHED THE DISHES."





"THE POODLE IN HOT PURSUIT."

That night, before going to bed, I hung several of Mr. Brown's hats and overcoats in the hall. I thought they had an air of protection about them. Then, after putting my various charges to sleep, I sat up to watch for burglars. The next morning I wrote a cheerful letter to Mrs. Brown, carefully leaving out all allusion to my troubles. All day long the basement and front door bells rang, and most of my time was taken up with answering. I was called to the basement door so often to refuse the requests of beggars and pedlars, that I thought it well to take extreme measures against them. I found a large square of cardboard, and with the aid of my paste-brush and some black paint I printed in bold characters the words, "No bottles! no beggars! Beware of the dog!" I hung it on the gate, and coaxed the poodle out into the area, after arranging his cushion and silk quilt upon the stones. I thought I should at least succeed in silencing the basement door bell. Two hours passed without disturbance, and then I heard a commotion. Going to the front door, I saw the area gate flung open, the area steps strewn with loaves of bread, and down the street the

baker's man was flying with an empty basket, and the poodle in hot pursuit. For the moment my sense of the ridiculous overcame every other feeling, and I could not help laughing. At the corner the poodle retraced his steps, and returned to the house, with his yellow ribbons flying and a sense of having done his duty as a watch-dog. In the afternoon the proprietor of the bakery himself called to inquire the cause of the disaster, and to present his bill for seven loaves of bread.

That night, at ten o'clock, the unexpected arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Brown relieved me somewhat of the strain under which I was suffering. They smilingly listened to the recital of my woes, which apparently appealed to their sense of humour. Mrs. Brown declared that, although she might be a poor housekeeper, without a sign of "tact," yet she had never been quite so unfortunate as I had been; and then, to soothe my wounded feelings, she presented me with one of the latest Paris hats.

She and I are still the very best of friends, and I often partake of her hospitality; but I have never since ventured to call her attention to her shortcomings in the housekeeping line.