



SERVANTS.

BY THE HON. MAUDE STANLEY.



T is very strongly my conviction, that servants are now as good, as trustworthy, and as capable as in former days. But are the mistresses, I would ask, as good now, as they were fifty years ago? Are they as good house-wives? Do they know as much about cooking, preserving, furniture-cleaning or laundry-work? Possibly they may have learned the scientific properties of food, have heard of steam laundries, and of the chemical properties of furniture polish; but have they ever boiled a potato? Have they made preserves, or do they know the meaning of elbow-grease, for making their furniture bright and clean? Can they do what their grandmothers did, or are they only pleasure seekers, idle dreamers, female politicians, or busy philanthropists, too full of engagements to give one thought to household cares and household duties?

In large establishments the lady will have her housekeeper, who saves her the trouble of looking after the minutiae of the servants' work; but even the great lady will not have good servants if she knows nothing of them herself. Some ladies visit the East End, look after the poor in their own neighbourhood, or go long distances to amuse girls from factories and workshops, but do not even know the names of their own housemaids and kitchenmaids. They may show much sympathetic interest in the lives of the tailoress, or the milliner; but are often ignorant of the troubles and cares of those in their own household. The old proverb that "charity begins at home" may mean, that care and thought for the working classes should begin with the care and the thought for Mary, Jane, or Susan, who are dependent on their mistresses for their happiness, well-being, and in their earlier days of service, for their good or bad training.

What is the reason that the mistress who has but one or two servants so often complains? May it be that she has not considered that an hour a day would be well spent in looking after her home, and in teaching and training her young and inexperienced servants. Has she shown the young nurse how to bathe the baby, and have everything to hand, no hurry, no sudden remembrance when baby is on her knees, after its pleasant bath, that the powder is in the next room, or that the clothes are not quite ready for use? Has she seen that the housework has been done well, the floors well scrubbed, the corners swept out, and the brass work bright?

A few minutes spent daily in each room will satisfy her that all is in order, and a more careful visit once a week when she gives out the clean linen, will show her that the beds are well made, and that clothes and rubbish are not stuffed away under the servants' mattresses. Then she should visit the kitchen, and on the table should be spread before her all that is left of yesterday's provisions, to enable her to see what more is wanted for the day's consumption, nor should she neglect to see to the spotless cleanliness of the kitchen cupboards and drawers, and that no caps or hats are left on the dresser. Servants do not object to this overlooking on the part of their mistress, but get an enthusiasm for their work, as they find that it is dignified by approbation.

Let me speak too of the general servant so much sought after, and to whom wages are paid of £18 to £24 a year: these are the higher class of "generals." They are found in families who live in well-furnished, substantial houses, where all is comfortable and often refined. The best are difficult to obtain, for it requires a most orderly head, a capable mind, and dexterous hands to combine the many duties required of the general servant. She must be parlour-maid, housemaid, and cook; thoroughly understand all the branches of domestic work; and, above all, take a pride and pleasure

in seeing that her work is well done. For several reasons she may prefer such a place to those she might have in larger families with many servants. She will not have many mistresses to please and consider, as is the case of those who are under-servants in great establishments. She knows that all the work must be done by herself, and so she can plan and arrange best how to do it. She will enjoy being the one trusted and valued servant of the house, with no opportunity for jealousy, the bane of many servants. If there is any little pleasure to be had, any dainty bit to get, she has it all. She has no troublesome tempers to put up with but her own, should she have one, and we know that tempers improve where there is no friction. So for all these reasons a well-trained high-class "general" has a very good place in domestic life.

And how, it may be asked, are servants and mistresses to get well suited? It seems to me that the characters of each should be gone into; inquiries should be made on both sides. Is it not a contract? and are there not two parties to a contract? Is it not as important to the one as to the other that the representations made on each side should be correct? The engagement may be made through advertising or through registry offices. The latter are in many cases a snare. When the servant has paid her registering fee she is told of this or that place, often at very long distances; and she may at last find out that the office-keeper has merely copied out advertisements from the newspapers, without any knowledge of the place or mistress of whom she pretended to have such intimate acquaintance. There are of course many reliable and excellent registry offices. The misfortune is that the servant cannot distinguish for herself between the respectable ones and those that are not so. Advertising for places is often a successful way of finding good service: the mistress and maid are thus brought together without an intermediary, who may or may not represent the facts, and it will often be the cheapest and most expeditious way of finding a place.

Young servants may never rise to the highest sphere of domestic work, for they may not have in them the capacity for higher work, or they may marry young, in which case there will be this advantage, that they will bring into the home of the working man many comforts of life—the result of domestic training. Visitors to the homes of the poor, whether in town or country, at once perceive if the wife has ever been in service, for in their homes there is an appearance of tidiness and comfort that is often missed in others of the same class.

Servants are trained for service in many different ways; some will not leave home till they are seventeen, after learning from careful mothers a great deal of household work. In many counties of England by that age girls will not only know how to bake, wash, and iron, but will understand something of cooking and house-cleaning. This training can alone come from the country homes; and that is no doubt the reason why people so often end their advertisements by saying, "country servants preferred." From London homes girls generally go out much earlier; they are as a rule quite untrained in household work, and at first get small and often very hard and miserable places.

It is often said that girls will not in the present day go into service, that they will only work at trades or in factories. This is partly true; but the dislike arises from the miserable life that the lowest class of general servants too often lead, and to such service the untrained girl can alone aspire. She is expected to know all about domestic work, and has probably never seen most of the articles of every-day use.

The only training which a girl gets at present at the elementary schools which would directly help her in domestic work is needlework and cooking. Before long I hope to see added to this instruction in the London Board schools that of laundry-work and housework.¹

Another way in which girls are prepared for service is by being brought up in large industrial schools, some established for orphans and destitute children, others under the Poor Law or Industrial Acts. In such schools everything is well considered by committees of management, and the children are well looked after. The best and newest appliances are used, but the very perfection of the washing and laundry departments often turn the girls into mere machines: they never have that valuable education of home life, where "necessity is the mother of invention," and where straitened means have caused the mistress to make the best of everything she had by her.

To visit a large home of hundreds of children is in some respects a sad sight, when we consider the loneliness of heart of the little creatures, who appear before us

¹ At many schools in Liverpool such instruction is given.

in such perfect discipline. There can be no home feeling in large dormitories, in splendid kitchens, in immense dining halls. True, they are spotlessly clean and have every sanitary arrangement; but at best they are a poor substitute for home life. I often find that the children who have been brought up in these institutions have knowledge but not education so far as it means drawing out and exercising the individual faculties.

Small industrial homes are admirable ways of training young servants; but better still is the training of girls in large or small houses where there are good upper servants, or an excellent mistress who will take an interest in such work, and in this way the best of all results can be obtained. In no way have I ever heard of such training being more successfully carried out than by Lady de Vesce in Ireland. For thirty years four girls, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, have had a three years' training in the laundry, and at the present time besides the laundry girls there are two in the housemaids' department, and one in the still-room.

Servants are so well off compared to all other wage-earning women, that they should save and be able to provide for marriage, for a rainy day, or for old age. We know it can be done, and happily in many instances provision is made. It will mean some self-denial, and some carefulness. Many of our modern luxuries have unfortunately descended very low in the social scale. What would our grandmothers have said to the young servant girl who spent nine shillings on photographs of herself in three months. Dress is also a cause of great waste of money. A mistress can do much when the servant is young, by showing the value of saving, the way that money should be laid out, the extravagance of buying cheap and inferior materials for dress, and many other thrifty habits. To many a mistress does the maid owe a debt of gratitude for having given her a bank book, and persistently encouraged her to put by whenever her wages were paid. Like many other virtues, thrift is quite easy when the habit is acquired, and the young servant will often get into the habit of saving through the good and kind influence of her mistress.

We might learn some good lessons from American mistresses. We find that the American lady, whatever wealth she may possess, will yet look into all household arrangements with care. With us luxuries belong to all classes, from the smallest wage-earning girl to the lady who has her hundreds a year to spend on herself; and so, when we try to inculcate thrift in servants, we are struggling against an evil which has entered into the heart of our nation.

I cannot finish these few words about servants without saying something of their pleasures. Are these sufficiently thought of? Are they enough considered?

On their part, how self-forgetting they are, often having more thought for the ailments of their mistress than for their own sufferings. What sleepless nights will the nurse have with a fretful baby; how often will unexpected work oblige a servant to give up her evening out with her friends; and how little does she see of the outside world in her two Sunday afternoons in the month, often the only time she is allowed to be out by daylight.

Think of the poor little maid-of-all-work who sits alone night after night in her lonely kitchen, and who for companions has but black beetles or cockroaches. Can we wonder that she spends many pennies every week on those sensational serials that take her for a short time out of these dismal surroundings? Her mistress may never have offered to lend her any books, or taken into consideration how the evenings of the little drudge were spent.

Alas! mistresses have much to answer for. What work has been left undone! What opportunities lost! And what unkind words, and thoughtless neglect of those who have lived under their own roofs.

No rule can be laid down as to what pleasures should be given to servants: they must depend on the circumstances of the family in every respect; but does not this golden rule cover all the ground—"Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them"?

I don't say that there are not many bad and indifferent servants; but the careful mistress will try and make a good choice when engaging a servant, and if she finds out she has been mistaken, she will not keep one who will not fall into the ways of her orderly and well governed house. Who that has known the value of a good servant, the old and trusted friend of the family, the devoted friend of the children as they grow up, will not feel that a good servant is a treasure beyond all price.