

3 ENGLISH AND AMERICAN MISTRESSES AND MAID SERVANTS—A COMPARATIVE STUDY 3

IN England they think they have a "servant problem."

In America we know we have one. That is one of the principal differences between the two countries in regard to the problem of how to get one's housework done.

I am bound to say that I myself was under the impression that there was a serious servant problem in England up to the time I left that country some months ago and returned to my own land, but now I find my mind continually harking back to a year ago when I lived in what seems now to me to have been the Golden Age in so far as servants were concerned.

I am always bringing to my mind all the good points of my own faithful maid-of-all-work, Barnstable, and unless I tax my memory very hard indeed, I seem not to remember that she had her faults, and am wondering what in the world made me "give notice" to her on an average of every six weeks. To be sure, I knew I did not mean the "notice," and she knew it, too, but why did I do it? I must have fancied I had wrongs, but for the life of me I do not seem to remember what they were. All this state of bewilderment comes from watching the ways and woees of my own countrywomen.

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Barnstable was twenty-seven years old. She had sweet manners and a gentle way with her. She was tall and good looking. She wore spotless print dresses with linen apron, collar and cap in the morning, and in the afternoon she was a thing to rest one's tired eyes upon, dressed in her black gown, her bibbed, embroidered apron, Eton collar, turn-over cuffs, and dainty cap—somewhat more dressy than the one she wore in the morning. She was always "dressed for afternoon" at 1 o'clock, when she served my luncheon. I paid Barnstable twenty-two pounds a year, or a little less than two dollars a week, and for that wage, which was said to be "ridiculously high for a struggling journalist" to pay, she did the following things:

She did all the work and all the cooking, but not all the washing and ironing. She went to the corner post box many times a day with letters; she did all the marketing and kept the accounts. Instead of three meals a day she really got four. Americans would call six—that is,

she brought the early tea and toast to the bedroom, served afternoon tea, and then insisted on my eating a supper somewhere about 10 o'clock at night, besides preparing the usual three American meals—breakfast, luncheon, and dinner. She kept my bureau drawers in order, and it was, by the way, because, as she said, I "disordered" them that she once threatened to leave. She handed my clothes to me when I was going out, prepared my bath, mended all my clothes, made underwear, brushed my hair, pulled off my boots when I was tired, and carried messages around London to my friends.

In short, Barnstable did everything, and yet, in the English sense of the word, she was not a peculiar "treasure." She was only an ordinary English maidservant working for "one lady alone." There are hundreds like her.

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But in all the United States where can her like be found? The nearest thing approaching to Barnstable that I have seen was in the person of a maid to the wife of a millionaire in Chicago, but this maid never did any housework. But she looked something like Barnstable, and had her nice manner. She was paid \$35 a month and all her mistress' cast-off clothes.

In England poor persons keep servants. When I say poor, I do not mean the lower classes, but the poorer middle and upper classes. The wife of a city clerk who gets only \$15 a week keeps a servant. She will pay her, perhaps, £10, or \$50 a year. This sort of girl will belong to what are known as the "slavery" ranks. In appearance, dress, manners, and method of doing her work she will be quite as good as, if not better than, many maids one comes across in the United States who are being paid \$20 a month and more. She is usually quite young and somewhat "green," and certainly she may be called untidy, but she is only a "slavey," and one knows what to expect from her.

In English families where the head of the house has an income of \$40 a week, two servants are likely to be kept. If there are children there will certainly be a nurse. In such a family a house parlor maid, who will be about the same as the New York chambermaid, will receive, say, £14 or £16 a year, and the cook will be paid £20. She will not be what the Americans call a good cook. She calls herself a "plain cook," and certainly her cook-

ery is not of the fancy brand. It is also tasteless, as a rule. When you eat the cabbage she cooks you salt it to suit at the table. It will be watery. All her vegetables will be watery and her meat will generally be dried up.

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But if you want to pay as high as \$30 a year you can get a good cook, and, it may as well be added, an extravagant one. This matter of extravagance, or wastefulness, is one of the troubles the English housewife has to contend with. It is one of the things that makes her think she has a servant problem. There is more waste going on in a moderately well-to-do London family than in the same sort of family in New York. The dust bins of London would be rich finds for an American farmer's pigs. Indeed, the very dish water is rich with soups, gravies, and butter, for the English cook or kitchenmaid will not scrape up her dishes, thinking it saves time to wash the scraps off in the dishpan.

It is difficult to induce the English servant to learn new ways, and this is the stumbling block over which many American women fall when they attempt to set up housekeeping in England. The average American woman, being a more thorough housekeeper than the Englishwoman, and knowing more about work, because she has in so many instances been brought up to do her own work, starts out housekeeping in London on the reform idea, and that is the reason she cannot keep servants. English servants speak of American women as "bad mistresses," and very often Americans applying at employment offices are frankly told that it is very difficult to get servants to take situations in American families. They dub the American mistresses as "slave drivers," "no lady," "bad mannered," "interfering."

English housemaids look with amazement upon the American lady who says: "Now, Mary, I always made my beds in such and such a way." They have probably never met an English lady who made her beds in any way, and they cannot understand that we American women come from a country where servants are so scarce and so expensive that unless we are rich we are forced to turn in and do a good part of our housework ourselves, if not all of it.

The English servant dislikes a mistress

who knows more about the way of doing work than she herself knows, and, if she is a well-trained servant, she resents "interference," and one can hardly blame her. I have known American women in London to discharge their servants because they would not make the beds American fashion or because they insisted upon brushing the crumbs off the table after the pie or pudding instead of before. Adaptable in many ways, the American woman is not adaptable to the housekeeping customs of other lands. At least it takes her a great many years to get adapted, and during the process of adapting she writes over to America concerning the "stupid foreign servants." In all but one respect she learns, when in Rome, to do as Romans do. She will not keep house Roman fashion.

But to return to the English mistress in her own land, and the American in hers. One of the things I have noted in England is the extreme politeness with which the Englishwoman treats her servant. "Please" and "thank you" are very much in use. She is very careful to say "good night" and "good morning;" she has a sweet way of saying "would you mind" "doing such and such a thing. Of course, if the maid retorts that she would mind, she will leave at the end of her month, but that does not alter the fact that it is pleasant to be addressed in a polite manner. In return, the average English servant is polite to her mistress.

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The average American woman lacks this pleasant way of speaking to those who serve her in the household. When I first returned to New York I was continually surprised and amused at the way so many servants had of saying, when I thanked them for anything, "Why, you're welcome!" "Don't mention it!" I can imagine the Englishwoman's amazement, upon thanking her butler for a glass of water, to hear him say, "You're welcome, Madame!" It is my impression that if the servants here were more accustomed to politeness from their employers they would show better manners in return. Like mistress, like maid, in this respect in the United States. I am always surprised when a cook or chambermaid is polite to me. I am amazed at a "thank you" or an "if you please." Indeed, since I have returned to

my own country I have felt an aspiration to be treated as an equal by the maid who makes my bed and the negro buttons who hands me a card, for I have noted that they treat me as their inferior, and this is hard to bear.

The young women who do housework in America seem to be under the impression that they will compromise their dignity by being polite, while their employers merely "haven't the time" to be polite to them.

It may be objected that this rudeness is foreign, not American, since so many of our houseworkers are from other countries. Still, they are polite in their own countries, and I cannot but think that it is the rude American associations that corrupt their native good manners.

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I have heard English servants say that they disliked to do things for Americans "because American ladies never appreciate anything." I have then inquired whether American women were not generous in payment, and their reply has been, "Yes, but they don't say 'thank you' the way our English ladies say it."

One of the chief reasons that American women have so much trouble in getting and keeping servants is, it seems to me, to be found in the way the American children are brought up. To be sure, the United States is not a country where there is a multiplicity of children in the average family. Quite the contrary; but the one child, or the two or three children, cannot but be thorns in the flesh of the cook, chambermaid, or maid-of-all-work. In the average household they have no nursery, no place where they are made to understand they must keep themselves and their playthings. No sooner is a dining room cleaned up than they are allowed to put it in disorder. They have the run of the kitchen and the parlor, the bedrooms and the halls. The baby, in his highchair, sits at the family table and creates havoc with the tablecloth, which in many families the servant has to wash. The steps are no sooner scrubbed than they are dirtied by the returning schoolboy. In England the children have their place and are kept there. In America their place is everywhere, and they are always there.

Eleven years ago, in order to get information concerning the servant question in England as compared with that in America, I donned a cap and apron, and took

situations as housemaid and parlormaid. I kept an open mind and tried to be impartial in my judgment. On the whole, if I were obliged to gain my livelihood by domestic service, I should prefer to serve in an English rather than an American family. This, of course, leaving altogether out of the question the matter of the higher rate of wages in America. As I have said, the English mistress is more polite than the American. Then, she more often provides a separate sitting room for her servants, so they have not to sit in the kitchen when not working. She does not require such gigantic tasks of them as does the American woman. She has her children in their place and under control. She is not so "set in her ways" as the American woman, and she more often gives a servant credit for having a better knowledge of her own work than one who has only done housework occasionally. She sends the washing and ironing, not only of the family, but of the servants themselves, to the laundry, and so there is no wearisome steam-smelling wash days to put up with. It must, however, be taken into consideration that this absence of wash day is one of the causes or results of the lower wages paid in England.

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There is more system about the running of an English household, and things run more smoothly. As parlormaid in an English family I knew that if the doorbell rang I was expected to answer it. In an American family anybody seems to go to the door who happens to hear or be near.

These are some of the differences I have noted. There are as many similarities, and when this great "problem" is solved the solution may in many respects be applicable to both countries.

In the first place, notwithstanding the supposed fact that the United States is a land of equality while England is not, there is absolutely no difference between the social position of the American chambermaid and the English parlormaid. The so-called "stigma" is just the same in both countries. The absurd opinion that it is less honorable to peel a potato than to run a sewing machine prevails in England and America alike. The same sort of "looking down" is done upon the American as is done upon the English servant. I met at Ellis Island young English and Irish girls who have in-

formed me that they came to America because there was no "class distinction" here. When, to my shame as an American citizen, I have been obliged to explain to them that housework as a vocation is looked upon here in the same light as in the older countries; when I have had to explain to them that their friends here would be servant girls only, and that saleswomen in stores, stenographers in offices, factory girls at the mills, would not associate with them, their amazement and terror have been great. The pity of it is that these explanations have not been made to them before they left their own friends and their own country. However, had it been, it is very doubtful if the promised high wages would have had so much power to move them. When it comes to marriage here they will marry into their own class just as they would have done in England. The milkman, the butcher, the grocer boy, the garbage man will be their suitors. They had the same kind of suitors in England.

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But to this cloud upon their matrimonial prospects there is a silver lining, and one to which I would not neglect to point the lonely girl who comes to this country to seek her fortune. In her own country, once married to the milkman or the butcher boy, her sons will, in their turn, become milkmen and butcher boys, her daughters, in their turn, be servants. Her children will have been given the education of the English board school, in which school they will associate only with children of poorer and ignorant classes. In America her children may attend the State universities free of charge. They may become lawyers, doctors, clergymen, Senators, Governors, Presidents. The girls may grow up to earn \$80 a month at school teaching, and they may marry men in the learned professions. Of course, there will be American snobs who will remember that their mother was a servant, but in the long run it is likely to be forgotten, or rather, let it be hoped that in the long run housework will take its place where it belongs, among the most honorable of professions for women.

ELIZABETH BANKS.

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Sufficiency.

Hallroom—Here, chambermaid, you have left me only one towel.
"Well, missus said as you ain't goin' to be here more'n one week."