

## Housemaid's Knee

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human beings. And sometimes they carry their forgetfulness to absurd lengths. For example, there are the women, like my friend who received notice from Olga, who have been able to afford servants for so short a time that they do not know, as the saying is, how to manage them. To begin with, they want to impress their friends with the fact that they have servants, and so they are forever talking about them. This irritates a servant just as much as it would anybody else. Again, they must exhibit their servants before their friends, and as the friends usually show up at night, when the servant's work is supposed to be done, this can bring on a situation that will drive any girl frantic. I had to leave one place on account of this. The thing came to a head one night when I had special plans on. They were very special plans. Some Norwegian friends of mine had got up a fancy dress ball, and I had made myself a little costume to wear to it that I thought was very pretty. I had told the lady I worked for that I wanted to be off that night, as indeed I was supposed to be off every night, and she said it would be all right.

## An Angry Toreador

This may not seem very important to you, but when you are seventeen years old, and have a chance to go to a fancy-dress ball as a gay señorita, with a dashing Norwegian boy who is going as a bullfighter, it can be almost the most important thing in the world.

I had finished my work, gone to my room, and just started to take the costume off the hanger. There came a knock at the door.

"I'm sorry, Dagny," said the lady, "but we are going to have company tonight and you'll have to stay and serve."

Do you know who the company was? Two people who had called up to say they were coming over to play bridge. And I knew, having worked in a good many American homes by that time, that a real American lady would have thought nothing of serving the guests herself, or more likely, of inviting them out into the pantry to raid the icebox. But this woman was only recently a lady, and she was so afraid the guests would not see how elegant she was that she made me stay to serve four tongue sandwiches, four pimento sandwiches, and four cups of coffee. I spare you my tears. They stopped playing bridge at eleven-thirty, I got to the ball at one o'clock, and the dashing Norwegian bullfighter was so angry I think he could have bitten a bull in two. But I imagine you can see why I left that place as soon as I could get another.

Of course, I realize that there is a mistress' side to this too. Many girls are lazy, and take all sorts of advantage of the lady by whom they are employed.

They know so many mean little tricks that I could not begin to list them all. For example, there was the girl in a house where I worked who had been told to wash the windows in two of the bedrooms. The lady went out, and I went to my room. I was supposed to be off, but it had started to rain and I decided not to go anywhere.

Pretty soon the girl came in.

"Well," I said, "did you get those windows washed?"

"Sure," she said.

"You work pretty fast."

"It's all in knowing how."

Later I overheard this conversation: "Lydia, did you wash those windows?"

"Yes'm."

"They don't look very clean."

"They were clean, but the rain came and dirtied them all up again. Rain always dirties them up. I declare, there's hardly any use washing them while we're having all this wet weather."

"Well—all right."

I give you a guess as to whether the windows had been washed or not.

Then many girls don't behave themselves as well as they ought. I failed to get a place from one woman because the girl who had preceded me had done something scandalous. The lady was all ready to take me. Then, all of a sudden, she said:

"Do you have a brother?"

"Why, yes," I said.

"Then I'm sorry," she said, "but you won't do."

"What has my brother got to do with it?" I said.

"I'll not have any more brothers," she said. "That's why I'm put to the trouble of getting a new girl now. The last girl had a brother. Oh, yes. The first I heard of him was yesterday. She said she was sick, and that her brother would probably call. He did. He got here about eight o'clock last night. And he left about eight o'clock this morning. I was getting breakfast, because I thought that if she was sick I would let her stay in bed. And then all of a sudden he came down, sneaking out the back stairs. So I told him if he would wait a minute he could take his sister with him."

"Oh, no. No more brothers."

Then there is the matter of training. If a lady is breaking in a green girl, she does not get much for her money for the first month or so. The girl doesn't know anything, and it takes time and trouble to teach her.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the lady who employs a servant faces a condition, not a theory, and the condition is that it is up to her to manage the servant, not up to the servant to manage her. That being the case, it will repay her to look at things occasionally from the servant's point of view.

What the housemaid needs, in my opinion, is a personal regard for the woman who employs her. In other words, she needs human treatment. That is the one thing that can take the unpleasantness out of a great deal of work that she does, for while doing that work might be a horrible job under ordinary circumstances, it may not be so horrible if she likes Mrs. So-and-So, and thinks Mrs. So-and-So will be pleased if it is done well. That has been the one thing that has been present in the case of several women I know of who can keep servants and get good work out of them.

## An Incentive to Work

In my own case, during the whole time I was doing housework I worked for one woman who made me feel happy and contented with my place. She was not easy on me. She gave me a great deal to do. She had a large apartment, and she made me keep this clean, make the beds, and cook the meals and serve them. But she was perfectly fair with me. She did not pile up extra tasks on me at a moment's notice, and the result was that I had an incentive to get some system into my work, since I knew that when I was through with it I was done. If I had two or three hours on my hands she did not bother me; I was free to sit around and do what I pleased.

Another thing she did was to realize there was a difference between being in uniform and being out of it. When I had an afternoon off and had changed

into street clothing, she often used to get her son to take me out riding in the automobile. She used to say this was because the neighborhood, which was Riverside Drive, New York, was so lonely for me. But I think she knew how much it means to a girl to be treated, in off hours, as though she were not a servant. I wish I could impress on ladies how important this can be. Any girl, you may be sure, is sensitive about being a servant. She does not talk about it with her friends, or if she does, tells some little fib about it, pretending that she is a "governess" or something of the sort. And when a lady allows her to forget occasionally that she is the servant, it will pay dividends, I guarantee. That girl is not going to forget a thing like that.

Why did I leave that lady? I didn't leave her. I might have been with her yet, for all I know, but she moved away to Philadelphia and I didn't want to leave New York.

I know a lady who employs a girl friend of mine, a Swedish girl. Here again, the work is no soft snap. My friend has to work, and work hard. But the lady is very nice to her in many ways. She has fixed her up a nice room where she can have her friends. Whenever any of them come, she always comes up for a little visit, bringing a plate of candy or something. She stays only a few minutes, but it makes all the difference in the world about how that girl feels.

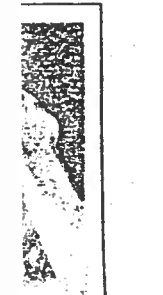
## Dividends of Thoughtfulness

Then she arranges for a vacation of two weeks every summer, with pay, and she doesn't change her mind at the last minute, as some women do. The result is that my friend has been with her five years, and if she doesn't get married or go back to Sweden, will probably be with her five years more. A little thoughtfulness has paid that woman very well.

I know of a lady who lives on Park Avenue, New York. Her servant is a Polish woman, a Polish Catholic, and such a cook as she might dream about. Well, that lady would have lost this cook long ago if she hadn't too much sense, for her husband is an atheist, and he thinks it very comical to make it hard for the cook to go out to Mass. She goes out every morning at a quarter to eight, and just about that time this man is likely to call out that he is ready for his eggs or something. This always flusters Margareta horribly, for she is terrified at the idea of missing Mass, and yet when she is told to bring the eggs what can she do? But the lady always fixes things up. She calls out for her not to mind the eggs, and to go on to Mass, because she is a very lovely lady and understands all about how much Mass means to this woman. Also, she is a very sensible housewife and has no intention of losing a fine cook for the sake of some foolish comedy about atheism. She has not lost her. She has kept her nine years.

I could tell you more stories of this sort, but there is no need to. The moral is always the same. When servants are satisfied, they stay; when they are not, they leave. And the way to keep them satisfied is to treat them decently. So if you have been having trouble with your servants, by having them leave, or shirk their work, or take things, or something else, take a tip from me who used to be a servant. Try to see things their way once in a while, and you may find that things go a lot better.

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