

WHAT I THINK OF MISTRESSES

By A MAID

I AM not now a domestic servant. Heaven helping me I never shall be one again. I say this with no feeling of spite against mistresses. Who knows? I may be a mistress myself some day in this great country! I have no complaints of actual ill-usage to make. But when I read that article in last week's Courier on That Phantom—the Unhired Girl, I felt like writing to the editor and saying, "You only know half the problem." That is the truth. The other half is only to be learned from people who, like me, have been servants. In the factory where I work there are twelve servant girls, good, experienced girls. Not one of us, if we can help it, will ever return to "service," as it is called.

As a servant I have earned from twelve dollars to twenty dollars a month. In eleven years I have worked in four Canadian homes. In one of these four places I was a parlour-maid. In the other three I was a "general." I had two splendid mistresses and two bad ones. Bad ones sometimes seem to be in the majority. Even at twelve dollars a month I saved more money as a servant than I save now. I did not work as hard as I work now. But if I am asked to choose between house-work and factory-work I can only say there is absolutely no choice to my way of thinking. I feel as though I should say to every intelligent girl I see washing off somebody's front steps or answering a front door bell with her cap on: "Do be a woman and quit that work. Come on down town. Leave the kitchen for those that have to be in it." Mistresses, I know, will not like to read this, especially from one who confesses to having been a servant. I do not say it to hurt their feelings, but because I have sympathy with my fellow workers in domestic service and because their case should be understood.

THOUGH I call myself "Miss," I am married. I was born in the South of England, about thirty years ago, the daughter of a tenant farmer. At fourteen the wife of the local squire took me into her house for training. I worked two years for my board, training and clothing. I was taught how to polish brass, how to dust, how to sweep and how to bring in afternoon tea to the drawing room. I married at seventeen and went to live in London, where my husband was employed as a guard by the London and Southwestern. He died and I went into service again at twenty in a Bloomsbury boarding house. In other words I was a Bloomsbury slavey. You know the sort. I met a Canadian woman there who engaged me to come to Toronto. She said she had never seen servants in Canada who could polish brass as I could. I worked for her for three years at twelve dollars a month. She died and willed me an old brooch and a book about the Empire! I worked then for a grocer's wife on — Avenue for two years. Then for a broker's wife in Rosedale for a year and then for the wife of a struggling lawyer. I left that work for the munition factory, where I now am employed. I would rather miss a few meals than return either to the lawyer, the broker, the grocer or my first Canadian mistress. As for returning to England? No. And for the highest wage and the best mistress I ever heard one of my friends in service speak of, I would not return to service in any country, nor would any competent girl that I have known who has once tasted a different living.

Let me point out, first of all, the difference between being a servant in England and being a servant in Canada. I think it may be useful to Canadian mistresses who are employing old country girls, and to old country servants who want employment here. In England, serving is a profession—except among the very lowest class of employers—that teaches both the servant and her mistress their places and guarantees to each of them their rights. In Canada, serving is not a profession, but, in the majority of cases, it is a mere job taken on by people who can only regard themselves as makeshifts. In England, even in the houses of the very rich, a servant works much harder than in Canada, and she is compelled to do more thorough and conscientious work. But in Canada there is no standard of training or standard of service. Serving is a kind of work from which every servant in Canada hopes to graduate. That is unfortunately, yet fortunately, not true in England. In England the servant is trained to take a certain pride in her work and to have a certain respect from her employer. In Canada, she looks down on her work and is looked down upon by the employer. Two servants meeting in a moving picture theatre in England know one another as servants and have no false shame about it. In Canada, two servants

meeting in a moving picture theatre will hide the fact from one another as long as possible for fear the other is a stenographer or a clerk and likely to snub the mere servant. In England the relative positions of mistress and maid are more or less fixed. In Canada the average mistress is one moment likely to be confiding her choicest gossip to her maid, and the next moment gives her the cold shoulder as no English mistress would ever have done. Even the meanest boarding house slavey in Bloomsbury is allowed a certain personal self-respect which is not guaranteed in a Canadian household.

MY first Canadian mistress was a widow whose one aim in life was to live like a grand lady. She lived in mean quarters one year in order to have enough money to go to England and travel on the continent a second year. She hated Canada though she had been born somewhere in Ontario; the daughter of an Anglican rector. When she brought me back with her to Canada it was, apparently, with a view to making her home as much as possible like an English home of the same size. She built a fence around the little front lawn and called it the area. She bought a brass knocker at an antique shop, so that I might polish that and the door-knobs every morning before seven. She had a cup of tea and two thin slices of bread brought to her bedside each morning at seven-thirty, and I drew her bath—tepid—at 7.45. She had an English breakfast and an English lunch and tea at four-thirty. I never knew her to have any but one caller, an old maid with a mangy spaniel who came every second Thursday and retailed indelicate stories under the guise of being horrified. For this one caller we were always "at home" on Thursdays. My mistress abhorred the dog. He whined on the front door-step inside the area. For amusement we had a music box that must have cost two hundred dollars. Once a week I was directed to put on the record of the Chimes of Normandy. That and church once on Sunday—the local Anglican church—were our relaxations. My hardest work was dusting a collection of coral, star-fish and other strange things which my mistress had collected on a Cook's Tour to the West Indies. As she grew old she became deaf and cranky, but she depended on me and I did what I could for her. Serving her was much like serving in England. It was regular, smooth and easy.

THE grocer's wife had heard of me through her husband, with whom we dealt. When I came in to tell him my mistress was dead and to settle the accounts, he asked what my plans were. That night his wife called on me. I was puzzled. From what she said it was not clear whether I was to be a companion or a maid. She told me all about her illnesses and her children. She spoke of her occasional misunderstandings with her husband the grocer. Though I made it clear that I did not wish her confidences she kept on and I finally accepted her offer because the wage was higher—sixteen dollars a month. The grocer's house was a pretty place on a residential street, and I was given a cheerful room on the top floor, but the work was not smooth-running as in my first place. The grocer had breakfast at seven, his wife at eight, and the children—there were four, ages seven, eleven, thirteen and seventeen—anywhere up to half past eight. They all ate different sorts of breakfasts. The grocer would interrupt me on my way to and from the kitchen to grumble something about the morning's news or to complain of the weather. His wife never failed to begin the day with a recitation of her symptoms—what she had suffered during the night from this pain and that. The children were alternately sweet, loveable, helpless, and abominably rude and trouble-making. Canadian children are, as a general rule, rude toward servants. Their parents, in far too many cases, seem at a loss to know just how to teach the child the position of a servant. Often the grocer's wife did not dare to punish or correct one of the children for a mere rudeness to a mere servant; or else she ran the risk of it offending me. I got accustomed to take rudeness without any remarks, knowing that the mistress would presently be hinting at apologies.

In that house it was sometimes she that cooked and sometimes I that cooked. Whatever I did she was certain to interfere with in some way, sooner or later. It was not from any desire to be hateful, but from a certain mania for giving advice. In Eng-

land, a woman with such a mania would at least have restrained herself from venting it on her servants. Though I did not like the grocer's wife, I got to be a sort of secret counsellor of hers. She was a woman who craved anxieties and was uneasy when she saw nothing to worry her. She expected to die of malnutrition, anemia—or something like that. She died of fatty degeneration of the heart. The grocer's sister came to look after his house. She was an unpleasant woman. I gave notice.

The broker's wife was one of the newly-rich that the funny papers make so much fun of. I don't know why all newly-rich people should be made fun of. I suppose it is the double jealousy between them and the people who have always been rich and the people who never will be rich. But if my new employers had money it was because they deserved to have money. They knew how to handle it, to my way of thinking, and they weren't vulgar—not half so vulgar as plenty of the oldest and wealthiest families in England are. We had a cook, an upstairs maid and a parlour-maid in the broker's house. I was parlour-maid, and though you would not think I had much to do my mistress somehow managed to keep me busy. I think she was as close to being an ideal house-manager as I ever heard about. She had been a book-keeper in the office where her husband had learned the brokerage business. She had been a parcel-wrapper in a big shop before that again. She told me that when I was leaving and she was giving me advice about how to get on well in Canada. Yet she had a better manner toward servants than many a woman who has been brought up among them. She didn't give orders as though she was addressing the scum of the earth—many inexperienced mistresses think they must speak that way to show how much better they are than the servant—neither was she easy-going like mistresses who are afraid to give orders to their own servants.

SO many women—especially in this country—don't take the trouble to say what they mean, or to be clear. They use half-finished sentences and when they are at a loss for a word they keep filling in with, "You know what I mean? You know?" That sort of thing muddles many a servant, especially if it is a young and timid servant. But Mrs. Broker never did that. It seemed to me that she never commenced to speak until she knew what she wanted to say, and had the words chosen. Then she spoke quietly and deliberately. Only a very stupid person could have misunderstood her. She was never patronizing and never friendly. She treated the servants as though they were fellow-workers in accomplishing certain work every day. She was the manager. Beyond their work she required nothing, and furthermore she made certain hours for work and saw that those hours were strictly adhered to. Work began at seven in the morning and proceeded till nine at night with certain rest hours in between and certain afternoons and evenings off. If guests remained late, her husband or she herself opened the doors for them. If something was wanted in the night it was her rule not to disturb the servants if it could possibly be helped. The servants had good food—not scraps and left-overs—and uninterrupted meals. Though we worked hard and under a very exacting eye, we were contented.

I admit that it was a wealthy employer who was able to treat servants that way, and I admit also that this kind of service is much different from that of less pretentious households. But I want to say this, that people of modest or even small means could live much more comfortably and even with less expense if they organized the work of the servant by routine, and if they planned to allow the servant time for meals, for unbroken sleep and for recreation.

The broker and his wife went to Europe just before the war, and I engaged in the house of a lawyer, thinking to return to the broker's wife when she returned. But the war came and her husband joined the Imperial Army and his wife remained in England—and I remained with the lawyer and his wife. She was a large, florid woman, whose daily ambition was dinner. The husband was a dyspeptic and a bad manager financially. They wasted more food than would have fed another family twice the size. No one item of food ever came twice to that table. Even a huge turkey minus only a leg and two slices off the breast was banished to my cupboard and eventually thrown away or given to some beggar. Even that was against the law of that household.

I think the lawyer's wife took a pride in her right to throw things away if she wanted to. She was