

HOUSEKEEPING IN LONDON.

By A GIRL-PROFESSIONAL.

CHAPTER III.

CLEAN SWEEPING.



N the four weeks which preceded Mrs. Norris's entrance we were busily occupied in buying and fixing our furniture, and in unpacking and placing that which came to us from the country home which by then was being vacated. Also, as I mentioned before, a domestic angel had to be sought and found. As this latter quest had something of the amusing in it, I may be here allowed to digress a moment from sober details and tell our experience.

As we had planned the house, we had left out of calculation a room for a servant to sleep in. The smallest of the three rooms at the top could only be entered by going through one of the other two, and it seemed as though this put it out of the question for anyone's use but our own. My bed had been fixed here, and our mother was to have the larger room next this, while the bachelor kept the front one. Such a lavish spreading out was of course a folly, but we had yet to learn that. The last-named individual suggested that the maid should have a bed in the kitchen; it was certainly big enough. But against this I set my face like a flint, having far too exalted a conception of my future kitchen to admit of its being so desecrated. The next suggestion was that she should be one to sleep out and come in by the day, and this plan seemed most feasible; so feasible indeed, we felt we had alighted upon a most practical solution to the great vexed servant question in general!

Accordingly we inserted an advertisement in the local weekly paper, which was published every Friday evening. We asked for a "Superior general servant, well accustomed to wait at table." The paper was supposed to appear at seven o'clock; by five there came a smart knock at the door and I opened it to a much-befringed, rather lackadaisical "young lady." We duly questioned her, took her reference and then sent her away, promising to let her hear in the course of a week if her reference proved satisfactory. As she turned away from the door another applicant knocked, and the same performance was gone through again. And so it went on until, tired out, we turned out the lights and went to bed, having interviewed about twenty-seven applicants in all. Indeed, we had had to take turn about in answering the repeated knocks, and at last had curtly informed the later comers that we were "satisfied," though which to choose from them all we could hardly say. They were not taking specimens, many of them, all the charwomen of the neighbourhood seeming to see their chance in our offer; so we finally decided in favour of the first applicant, especially as the reference she gave was to a house quite near, and, when tested, proved satisfactory.

As I wished to get her into training, it was agreed that she should begin the next Monday morning, and she duly appeared about eight o'clock. Her dress was poor and much patched, but her fringe was more than enough to make up for all deficiencies! My heart was not very light as I set about the task of drilling her, and I was glad there was no critical stranger to note defects. It was not altogether a disappointment when, before the middle of the week, she announced her

intention of leaving, as she had a better offer. We parted company with little regret on either side, I fancy. I paused after that to enjoy freedom for another fortnight, then we advertised again, this time limiting the hours to the afternoon between three and five o'clock.

On this occasion the applicants were much less numerous, but of a decidedly better class; ultimately the choice was left between three, "Florence," "Rose," and "Nellie." Florence was little, fair, and very quick and bright; she seemed capable, but rather small. Rose was a decidedly pretty girl; her manners were taking and her complexion was dazzling. As she inquired what her duties would be, I incidentally mentioned that window-cleaning was not one of them, as I employed a man for that purpose; whereat she said, very demurely, there was "a very nice man, a friend of mine, who cleans windows beautifully, ma'am." I suspected that it was possible he might do other things as well, and mentally decided against this attractive Rose.

The last one of the three seemed a girl of quite another order, tall, rather plain-looking, very reserved and short in speech, and somewhat ashamed of taking a situation at all. She said she was an orphan, but wished to keep a home for her brother, and must get some work to do in the day. Asked if she was used to housework, she informed us she was "thoroughly domesticated and could do everything." As she stood high above me, it seemed to me that she might soon tower over me, so I somewhat reluctantly informed this paragon that her services might find a better market elsewhere, and decided in favour of the little maid who came first. Fortunately for me this proved a happy choice. Though small in body she had a fine spirit, and there was nothing she resented more than a hint that her work might be better done. Under her care our door knocker shone like gold, and the doorstep was a model to its neighbours, while we laughingly declared we were tempted to dine off the kitchen floor it was kept so white. She was deft in waiting also, and altogether proved as nearly like the treasure we sought as we could have wished. The one drawback was that it was against her parents' wish that she was out in service at all, and they gave her no peace when she reached home at night, naturally somewhat tired after her day's work and an hour's brisk walking. But she was a plucky little soul and determined to have her own way; had not circumstances turned against her she would probably be with us still.

When she had been with us four months her mother met with an accident which broke her leg in two places; she was taken to the hospital, operated upon, and all but died under the treatment. For this Florence was greatly blamed, and her family persecuted her so that at last she was compelled to give in, and I was left to "suit myself" again.

After this came a long unsettled period; they came and they went; three months was the longest "stay" we had, and I was beginning to feel like very wearying with its continual fret and friction. Some came so late in the morning I had to make all the fires and get breakfast before they appeared, and those who came the latest were the earliest to go away at night. At last, after many trials, we concluded that the servant problem was not solved, and as the opportunity of a vacant room came we decided to go on the ordinary lines and sought at a registry office for a general to "sleep in."

As the one who eventually arrived to fill the post stayed in it a year with varying success, I

will hark back to the beginning and recount our furnishing experiences.

We had three large pieces of furniture coming from home: a chamber organ, an airtight bookcase-secretaire and my own secretaire, which was the case of an old-fashioned cottage pianoforte transformed. This latter went downstairs to the breakfast-room where its use was most required, and it made a handsome object to look at. The other secretaire was placed in the back dining-room; it was too large and heavy to be in the front, and our thought was to make a sort of reading-room of the smaller one eventually. The organ we placed cornerwise to the left of the dining-room window, where it looked handsome and was not in the way of the chairs or table. Then the opposite corner cried out to be filled. We had two shelves with embroidered borders which had fitted into recesses in a former home. These placed to form a cosy corner looked very well, as their colours went with the wall-paper, and we got a carpenter to come in and fix them with brackets. They held some of our best books and a bit of china. Underneath these we placed our large morocco-covered armchair, a small octagonal table to hold a palm stood in front of the window, and afterwards a nice bamboo-table took up its position between the armchair and the fire-place.

We had no fender or fire-irons, and when we came to calculate the price of these we found it would cost us but very little more to lay down tiles and a curb. Accordingly Mr. Clay was requisitioned again, and he laid a hearth of small tiles of a deep yellow tint with a plain black curb, and the effect was good in the extreme. For the back room we felt we were not warranted in incurring the expense until necessary, so contented ourselves with placing a similar curb there and having the hearth nicely whitened.

In the drawing-room no change was needed, Mrs. Norris having fenders for every fireplace. This good lady was rather anxious we should take in all her goods and chattels, as she was resigning an eight-roomed house and was loth to store any of her furniture. But we held off, debating in our minds the wisdom of so doing, as she owned they wouldn't sell for much. Shabby second-rate things would not accord with our ideal of fitness. However, considering the slenderness of our means and the many necessary expenses, we were glad enough to take in her dining-table, a solid mahogany one, and a flat-topped cupboard which served as a sideboard *pro tem.*, and to these she afterwards added two leather-seated chairs, much worn.

Carpets and curtains were our first and principal outlay, entailing many measurements and much thought before we finally decided where to go and what to buy. For the dining-room, with its paper combining yellow, green, and grey, we decided that green of a soft quiet shade would be the most harmonious colour, and brown in furniture and ornaments. Before going to the larger furnishing warehouses we took a look about us, and in going up Regent Street saw the very carpets for our purpose in the window belonging to a firm whose name is incontestable where good taste is concerned. So we ventured in here. It was the manager himself who waited upon us, and he entered very kindly into our plans and gave us very helpful hints. We ended in purchasing a Roman carpet for the dining-room, self-coloured and reversible, of a soft, green shade, and sufficient serge of splendid quality to make a pair of curtains and a table-cover, with