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Workingwomen

Lucy E. Parsons

February 1, 1879

To the Editor of *The Socialist*: Believing it to be a principle of human nature for people to want to know what others think of them, I would like, for the benefit of workingwomen especially, to lay before your many readers a few extracts from an article entitled "Hints to Young Housekeepers," printed in *Scribner's Magazine* for January, 1879, as follows:

Choice of Servants

Unless they (the servants) have grown old in your service, it is better that servants should not be over forty, for many reasons. Cooks, chambermaids, and laundresses should be strong and active, wholesome and honest-looking, with clean hands, and no long backs, and reject finery. The better educated are more likely to understand their responsibility, and do their duty. For a waitress, you want good looks, an active and neat person, and quick motion.

Engagement of Servants

After making all inquiries, take the servant upon a week's trial. If not satisfied, extend it to a month,

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unless she is recommended by someone upon whose word you can depend. No servant has a right to throw a household into disorder by leaving without due notice. Make an agreement with the one you are engaging—in writing, if possible—that she must give you due notice of her departure, or forfeit a week’s wages. She should claim the same notice of dismissal, unless for misconduct.

Of course, there is never any “misconduct” on the part of the “mistress,” and any claim on the servant looking to a contingency of that kind would be considered the height of impertinence, that could only be appeased by peremptory dismissal, without “recommendation.” Still, there is an old adage somewhere, to the effect that “what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.” But I will continue to quote:

Never send for a servant who is already in a place (situation) or allow any person to apply to you who has not given due notice to her former mistress. I have known several instances of servants being offered higher wages to leave their “present employer”; it is a kind of burglary, and should be punished.

Treatment of Servants

Require careful performance of their duties, strict obedience to your orders, respectful manners, and willing service. They must have time to do their washing and keep their clothes in order, or they cannot be clean and tidy. Treat them with kindness, but never with familiarity. If they are sad and moody, take no further notice of it than to suggest (if practicable) that the usual holiday should

be taken on that day, rather than on the one appropriated to them. Allow them to see their friends in the evening, not in the daytime, for it interrupts work.

Too many servants is a greater evil than too few. They had better be fully employed than not have enough to do.

Duties of a Cook

If a cook could be persuaded [forced] to wear short clothes, short sleeves, strong shoes, a large apron, and clean collar, she would add much to her comfort and yours.

Now, girls, you can judge of how you are to be fed while in the bondage of aristocracy, for the aforesaid magazine gets it down to a nicety, thus:

A quarter of a pound of tea is sufficient for each person for the week, unless you give coffee, too, when one pound of coffee and half the quantity of tea will be sufficient. A pound of sugar is enough for each servant, a candle a week for each servant’s bedroom, and one for the cook for the cellar and closets.

Now, Mr Editor, I should much like to comment on the above audacious and gratuitous advice, but am afraid I have already gotten to the “boiling” space. I am in hopes the above items will draw from some of your many lady readers a far more pungent comment than I am capable of rendering. But if no one else does, I, perhaps, will attempt to analyze a few of them at some future time.