Indian Housekeeper’s Guide.

CHAPTER I.

THE DUTIES OF THE MISTRESS.

Housekeeping in India, when once the first strangeness has worn off, is a far easier task in many ways than it is in England, though it none the less requires time, and, in this present transitional period, an almost phenomenal patience; for, while one mistress enforces cleanliness according to European methods, the next may belong to the opposite faction, who, so long as the dinner is nicely served, thinks nothing of it being cooked in a kitchen which is also used as a latrine; the result being that the servants who serve one, and then the other stamp of mistress, look on the desire for decency as a mere personal and distinctly disagreeable attribute of their employer, which, like a bad temper or stinginess, may be resented or evaded.

And, first, it must be distinctly understood, that it is not necessary, or in the least degree desirable, that an educated woman should waste the best years of her life in scolding and petty supervision. Life holds higher duties, and it is indubitable that friction and over-zeal is a sure sign of a bad housekeeper. But there is an appreciable difference between the careworn Martha vexed with many things, and the absolute indifference displayed by many Indian mistresses, who put up with a degree of slovenliness and
dirt which would disgrace a den in St. Giles, on the principle that it is no use attempting to teach the natives.

They never go into their kitchens, for the simple reason that their appetite for breakfast might be marred by seeing the khitmatghar using his toes as an efficient toast-rack (fact); or their desire for dinner weakened by seeing the soup strained through a greasy pagri.

The ostrich, who, according to the showman, "'idles 'is head in the sand, and thinks as 'e can't see no one, as nobody can't see 'e," has, fortunately, an exceptional faculty of digestion. With this remark we will leave a very unpleasant subject.

Easy, however, as the actual housekeeping is in India, the personal attention of the mistress is infinitely more needed here than at home. There, once the machine is well oiled and set in motion, the mistress may rely on fairly even and regular working; here, a few days of absence, or neglect to keep her eyes open, and she will find the servants fall into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt. This is, of course, disheartening, but it has to be faced as a necessary condition of life, until a few generations of training shall have started the Indian servant on a new inheritance of habit. It must never be forgotten that at present those mistresses who aim at anything beyond keeping a good table are in the minority, and that pioneering is always arduous work.

The first duty of a mistress is, of course, to be able to give intelligible orders to her servants, therefore it is necessary she should learn to speak Hindustani. No sane Englishwoman would dream of living, say, for twenty years, in Germany, Italy, or France, without making the attempt, at any rate, to learn the language. She would, in fact, feel that by neglecting to do so she would "write herself down an ass." It would be well, therefore, if ladies in India were to ask themselves if a difference in longitude increases the latitude allowed in judging of a woman's intellect.

The next duty is obviously to insist on her orders being carried
out. And here we come to the burning question, “How is this to be done?” Certainly, there is at present very little to which we can appeal in the average Indian servant, but then, until it is implanted by training, there is very little sense of duty in a child; yet in some well-regulated nurseries obedience is a foregone conclusion. The secret lies in making rules, and keeping to them. The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness. The laws of the household should be those of the Medes and Persians, and first faults should never go unpunished. By overlooking a first offence, we lose the only opportunity we have of preventing it becoming a habit.

But it will be asked, How are we to punish our servants when we have no hold either on their minds or bodies?—when cutting their pay is illegal, and few, if any, have any sense of shame.

The answer is obvious. Make a hold.

In their own experience the authors have found a system of rewards and punishments perfectly easy of attainment. One of them has for years adopted the plan of engaging her servants at so much a month—the lowest rate at which such servant is obtainable—and so much extra as bakshish, conditional on good service. For instance, a khimatgar is engaged permanently on Rs.9 a month, but the additional rupee which makes the wage up to that usually demanded by good servants is a fluctuating assessment! From it small fines are levied, beginning with one pice for forgetfulness, and running up, through degrees of culpability, to one rupee for lying. The money thus returned to imperial coffers may very well be spent on giving small rewards; so that each servant knows that by good service he can get back his own fines. That plan has never been objected to, and such a thing as a servant giving up his place has never been known in the author’s experience. On the contrary, the household quite enters into the spirit of the idea, infinitely preferring it to volcanic eruptions of faultfinding.
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To show what absolute children Indian servants are, the same author has for years adopted castor oil as an ultimatum in all obstinate cases, on the ground that there must be some physical cause for inability to learn or to remember. This is considered a great joke, and exposes the offender to much ridicule from his fellow-servants; so much so, that the words, “Mem Sahib tum ko zarur kaster ile pila dana hoga” (The Mem Sahib will have to give you castor oil), is often heard in the mouths of the upper servants when new-comers give trouble. In short, without kindly and reasonable devices of this kind, the usual complaint of a want of hold over servants must remain true until they are educated into some sense of duty. Of course, common sense is required to adjust the balance of rewards and punishments, for here again Indian servants are like children, in that they have an acute sense of justice. A very good plan for securing a certain amount of truthfulness in a servant is to insist that any one who has been caught out in a distinct falsehood should invariably bring witnesses to prove the truth of the smallest detail. It is a great disgrace and worry, generally producing a request to be given another chance after a few days.

To turn to the minor duties of a mistress, it may be remarked that she is primarily responsible for the decency and health of all persons living in her service or compound. With this object, she should insist upon her servants living in their quarters, and not in the bazaar; but this, on the other hand, is no reason why they should turn your domain into a caravanserai for their relations to the third and fourth generation. As a rule, it is well to draw a very sharp line in this respect, and if it be possible to draw it on the other side of the mothers-in-law, so much the better for peace and quietness.

Of course, if the rule that all servants shall live in quarters be enforced, it becomes the mistress’s duty to see that they are decently housed, and have proper sanitary conveniences. The bearer should have strict orders to report any illness of any kind
amongst the servants or their belongings; indeed, it is advisable for the mistress to inquire every day on this point, and as often as possible—once or twice a week at least—she should go a regular inspection round the compound, not forgetting the stables, fowl-houses, etc.

With regard to the kitchen, every mistress, worthy the name, will insist on having a building suitable for this use, and will not put up with a dog-kennel. On this point the authors cannot refrain from expressing their regret, that where the power exists of forcing landlords into keeping their houses in repair, and supplying sanitary arrangements as in cantonments, this power has not been exercised in regard to the most important thing of all, that is, to the procuring of kitchens, where the refuse and offal of ages cannot percolate through the mud floors, and where the drain water does not most effectually apply sewage to a large surrounding area. With existing arrangements many and many an attack of typhoid might be traced to children playing near the kitchen and pantry drain, and as in large stations the compounds narrow from lessening room, the evil will grow greater.

In regard to actual housekeeping, the authors emphatically deny the common assertion that it must necessarily run on different lines to what it does in England. Economy, prudence, efficiency are the same all over the world, and because butcher meat is cheap, that is no excuse for its being wasted. There is no reason whatever why the ordinary European routine should not be observed; indeed, the more everything is assimilated to English ways, the better and more economical will be the result. Some modification, of course, there must be, but as little as possible. It is, for instance, most desirable that the mistress should keep a regular store-room, containing not merely an assortment of tins, as is usually the case, but rice, sugar, flour, potatoes, etc.; everything, in short, which, under the common custom, comes into the khansamah’s daily account, and helps more than larger items to swell the monthly bills. For it is absolutely impossible for the khansamah
to give a true account of consumption of these things daily, without descending to cowries, and the item is, it may be safely said in every case, a nominal charge far above actual expenditure. With regard to the best plan for keeping this storeroom, the next chapter must be consulted.

A good mistress in India will try to set a good example to her servants in routine, method, and tidiness. Half an hour after breakfast should be sufficient for the whole arrangements for the day; but that half hour should be given as punctually as possible. An untidy mistress invariably has untidy, a weak one, idle servants. It should never be forgotten that—although it is most true in India—if you want a thing done, you should do it yourself; still, having to do it is a distinct confession of failure in your original intention. Anxious housewives are too apt to accept defeat in this way; the result being that the lives of educated women are wasted in doing the work of lazy servants.

The author’s advice is therefore—

“Never do work which an ordinary good servant ought to be able to do. If the one you have will not or cannot do it, get another who can.”

In regard to engaging new servants, written certificates to character are for the most part of no use whatever, except in respect to length of service, and its implied testimony to honesty. A man who has been six or seven years in one place is not likely to be a thief, though the authors regret to say the fact is no safeguard as far as qualifications go. The best plan is to catch your servants young, promoting them to more experienced wages on the bakshish theory above-mentioned. They generally learn fast enough if it is made worth their while in this way. On the other hand, it is, as a rule, a mistake to keep servants too long in India. Officials should be especially careful on this point, as the Oriental mind connects a confidential servant with corruption.

To return to written certificates. Their total abolition is impossible in India where the society is so fluctuating, but it would
certainly be advantageous if a stand against them was made, except in certain cases. There is no reason whatever why further personal reference should not be requested in every “chit.” In the majority of cases this request could be complied with, to the great benefit of distracted housekeepers who, having engaged a cook adorned apparently by the seven cardinal virtues, find that the only merit he possesses is being the son of a father who, having died in the odour of sanctity, left his certificates to be divided amongst his children. But in this, as in all difficulties besetting Indian housekeeping, combined effort is wanting. It may safely be said that if Indian servants found cleanliness necessary in every service they took, the present abominations would soon disappear.

It is always advisable to give neat, durable, livery coats for wearing when on actual duty in the house. Broadcloth is a mistake, being hard to keep clean, and apt to get fusty. Good washing serge is best, made to fit well, but loosely, with sleeves of proper length and width. These coats, in the case of table servants, should hang on pegs in the pantry, and only be put on for actual attendance. If carefully brushed and put away as the warm season comes on, they will last for two years. For camp work, etc., a commoner washing suit may be given, and in the hot weather cotton liveries of dark blue may be given and washed regularly every week. Any little extra expense is better than having a servant behind your chair who reeks of dirt and smoke; or what is worse, in the cold season a whitened sculpchre whose outside snowiness conceals warm clothes which have been slept in for months.

Finally, when all is said and done, the whole duty of an Indian mistress towards her servants is neither more or less than it is in England. Here, as there, a little reasonable human sympathy is the best oil for the household machine. Here, as there, the end and object is not merely personal comfort, but the formation of a home—that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties.
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When all is said and done also, herein lies the natural outlet for most of the talent peculiar to women. It is the fashion nowadays to undervalue the art of making a home; to deem it simplicity and easiness itself. But this is a mistake, for the proper administration of even a small household needs both brain and heart. A really clever woman always sees this, and, like George Eliot, the greatest of modern women, prides herself on being an excellent housekeeper; and—as was written of that charming author—“nothing offends her more than the idea that her exceptional intellectual powers should be held to absolve her from ordinary household duties.” In regard to expenditure, the mistress of a house has it in her power to make debts, as to prevent them; for she, and she only, has the power of preventing that extravagance in small things, which is but the prelude to a like recklessness in greater matters.

It is astonishing how few women know how to keep accounts; yet this is the first step towards economy, and a little method and care in this point saves infinite friction. One special fault which the authors believe besets most women is the habit of not showing all transactions on paper. For instance, in paying a minor bill, some annas or pies are allowed to remain as advance, to be deducted from the next payment, which must then either be written down less than it is, or paid less than is written down. This is absolutely a false system, and is the cause of more dispute and hopeless addings up of balances than a novice can well imagine. So if you have two or more funds you nominally wish to keep separate, do not borrow from one and pay back to the other without showing the transaction; above all, do not receive small items of money and keep them off paper altogether by saying, “Ah, I paid that 1s. 8d. to So-and-so, therefore it is all square.”

Accounts, in fact, do not come under the head of Cookery!

At first we strongly advise daily reckoning and cash payments to the khansamah. It diminishes the opportunity both of forgetfulness and fraud; while the possession of no matter how small, or how large a sum in advance, seems to exercise a mighty temptation
on the native mind to balance expenditure so nicely that not one pice of the advance remains. Of course, when a servant is known, and has proved himself trustworthy, he may be given a book or books to be balanced weekly, but at first cash payments are better. It is better also to keep regular butchers, bakers, and milk books than to add all items indiscriminately into one account. And here we would warn young housekeepers not to descend to wrangling over prices or items. Accept past deceit or fraud as past; tell the offender quietly that you do not intend to pay such a price again, and in cases of extravagance, give the order that in future the ingredients are to be brought to you before being put into use. If meat is bad, or dear, resort for a week to doing your own marketing, but do not sit for half an hour and squabble over it with your khansamah. Make it a rule that all food which is to be used that day shall be personally inspected by the mistress, otherwise you may pay good prices for bad things. It must be remembered that half the faults of native servants arise from want of thought and method, and that mere fault-finding will never mend matters. A mistress must know not only where the fault lies, but how to mend it. So, in keeping accounts, a mistress must take the lead, and knowing the proper prices of the different articles, and the amount which ought to be consumed, set aside all objections with a high hand.

With regard to other private accounts, most of them should also be in the hands of the mistress; but whoever is responsible for them will, if wise, keep a regular debit and credit account of all incomings and outgoings. It is perhaps a not sufficiently considered fact that all public servants in India are bound to keep written accounts showing their total yearly expenditure. In addition to its great convenience, it is also a safeguard in the event of the yearly increasing risk of slander, and is a precaution which it is the wife's duty to see is not neglected.

Having thus gone generally into the duties of the mistress, we may detail, what in our opinion should be, the daily routine.
The great object is to secure two things—smooth working, quick ordering, and subsequent peace and leisure to the mistress. It is as well, therefore, with a view to the preservation of temper, to eat your breakfast in peace before venturing into the pantry and cookroom; it is besides a mistake to be constantly on the worry.

Inspection parade should begin, then, immediately after breakfast, or as near ten o'clock as circumstances will allow. The cook should be waiting—in clean raiment—with a pile of plates, and his viands for the day spread out on a table. With everything en evidence, it will not take five minutes to decide on what is best, while a very constant occurrence at Indian tables—the serving up of stale, sour, and unwholesome food—will be avoided. It is perhaps not pleasant to go into such details, but a good mistress will remember the breadwinner who requires blood-forming nourishment, and the children whose constitutions are being built up day by day, sickly or healthy, according to the food given them; and bear in mind the fact that, in India especially, half the comfort of life depends on clean, wholesome, digestible food.

Luncheon and dinner ordered, the mistress should proceed to the storeroom, when both the bearer and the khitmatghar should be in attendance. Another five minutes will suffice to give out everything required for the day's consumption. The accounts, writing of orders, etc., will follow, and then the mistress (with a sinking heart) may begin the daily inspection of pantry, scullery, and kitchen. But before she sets foot in the back purlieus, let her remember that if a mistress will not give proper appliances, she cannot expect cleanliness. If, however, this excuse is not valid, the authors' advice is—notice the least dirt, quietly, with the order that before going for his midday recess the servant in fault shall come personally and report its removal. Let the mistress then send another servant to see if this be true; but let her guard against giving herself the least trouble in the matter. For here, again, Indian servants are like children, gaining a certain satisfaction in the idea that at any rate they have been troublesome.