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## The Victorian domestic servants and their hidden reality

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### Abstract

The Victorian England saw the unforeseen material prosperity that benefitted thousands of individuals who started living an enviable life of opulence. But their support system at home was a large and untiring race of servants who gave up the best of their years in the service to their masters. But after retirement they were forced to live a life of penury and unthinkable physical and mental challenges and emotional void. This cruel system often goes unnoticed because of the overpowering and all-pervasive and much propagated worldly success of the Victorian Britain.

**Key words:** Victorian, servants, poverty, butler, maid, workhouse

The Victorian society was in a constant motion of fast changes in every field of life. For various reasons women had to find employments in any sphere but one among the most popular areas was domestic service. During the last years of the nineteenth century one third of female population in an age bracket of fifteen and twenty were employed in household jobs. Male servants were also inducted into affluent families. In the mid nineteenth century the growth in the number of female workers was rising steadily but at the end of the century with the introduction of many gadgets and availability of better job options the female employees started to diminish in number.

For young girls from relatively underprivileged backgrounds this type of domestic employment was prospective. They could find handsome wages from which she could save up a considerable part for their marriage and future. These servants got good lodgings; got chances to see the town life and could come across people from many walks of life which added to their experiences. This was a unique gateway to becoming an accomplished lady in those times.

In many cases they saw the stately homes for the first time; they had opportunities to specific duties, access to recreation. At the top of the pyramid were the cook, the butler, and the housekeeper. The butler oversaw the daily work of boot-boys, pages, footmen, and watchmen. Assistant cooks, scullery girls, kitchen girls, and stillroom maids were directly under the cook. The cook was in charge of the provisions and the pantry and he had the key. The housekeepers directed the parlourmaids, nurserymaids, housemaids, laundry girls and other female indoor workers. It was her responsibility to recruit employees and if the need be to dismiss them summarily. She often kept books. Gardeners, grooms, and coachmen were employed by the house stewards. In many cases the scullery maids were promoted the kitchen maids. similarly, nurserymaid rose to nurse; from page boy to footman to butler. The ladies' maid often required to be apprenticed to a tailor. Most of the girls were employed in households where one to three

employees were at work. Girls at the age of twelve or thirteen would often begin work in households. In rare cases she would be treated as a daughter but in most cases however she would work for sixteen to eighteen hours and there were no child labour laws.

In households having employed three servants, comprising the cook, the housemaid and the nursemaid, the cook was the boss and she would confer with the lady of the house on daily menu of dishes, cleaning, and other routine chores. In a three servant house the lady of the house often would share some work; tutored the children in their lessons etc while the nurse maid often cleaned the rooms and wash the diapers.

Some of the rules for servants were moving quietly and gently; talk in a low tone. On meeting any household member like the master or the mistress of the house they were needed to stand back and let them pass. While carrying any load or heavy packet and accompanying the employer the rule was to keep few paces behind. Smiling or giggling unnecessarily, entering private chatting, offering intelligence without any need were prohibited. She often prepared dishes on washdays so that both housemaid and the cook could be free for the monotonous drudgery of boiling, scrubbing, cleaning, wringing, and drying the clothes and linens.

Female servants were mostly spinsters. The main chef was older and carried the salutation Mrs and she was often a widow. Other servants were often addressed either by their first or last names. Young domestic workers despised that the mistress insisted that there be absolutely no followers, meaning "no boyfriends." But servants found an opportunity in meeting tradesmen and courier boys and to make several friends while they were going to church or accompanying kids to playground. intelligent mistresses realised that clandestine meetings were not smart, so they allowed servants to call a friend into the house once in a while for some refreshment.

Manuals and literatures detail the responsibilities of specialized servants in big households. A butler was a social marker for high station. He oversaw the other male servants and was answerable for formal rooms. it was his duty to see the fires and lanterns were lit; curtains were drawn or undrawn as they should be, and papers and stationery at their proper places. The butler ushered visitors and supervised the arrangements of meals. He saw for the wine and liquor and the silverware; he preserved all of the keys and locks and made certain that everything was securely locked up at night. The butler took special care of the master's closet and personal belongings in the absence of a valet. The butler did not put on livery; his fatigues were the normal clothing of a gentleman. The family preferred to address him by his surname and the other servants addressed him as Mr. His rank was of trust and grave responsibility—and in addition to his salary, he had the scope for amassing tips and commissions from merchants of liquor and sundry other key suppliers of household necessities. By convention, the butler was superannuated with adequate savings to start up a public house or a seaside lodge (and many a time he preferred the nuptials with any of the female house staff to earn a companion in the venture).

Footmen were engaged in both domestic and outdoor duties. They delivered news, did perform errands, bore baggage and looked after railway bookings. Indoors, they lit fires, trimmed and cleaned lamps, opened the doors, washed glass and silverware, performed as valet for gentlemen of the house, took trays from the kitchen to the serving section, managed tea

service with its vessel of simmering water, and performed other heavy and odd jobs. When the master or mistress were out (either on foot or on a buggy), the footman rushed off to offer an escort, take parcels, ring the doorbell. Footmen were picked out like few other servants for their appearance and presentability. They were required to wear conventional uniform that included breeches, deliberating a fine pair of shapely legs. They were called by typical names rather than their own Christian names: Thomas, James, John, Charles, John. A footman was apprenticed as a young man who aspired to become an accomplished butler or to manage a boarding school or college hostel. The pageboy was the junior most boy servant who did odd jobs, polished shoes for the members of the family and sometimes those of the senior servants too.

The valet paid attention to the gentleman's personal needs. His duty list included taking care of the master's clothing, carry water to the bath, wait on his master at the time of a meal or at other times. Married men preferred not to have valets. They worked fundamentally for singles (who might inhabit hotels or a mess instead of keeping an abode with a servant member) and for aged and infirm men. One of the reasons why manservants got recruited only in important households, beside their higher wages, was that the administration imposed a tax for keeping a male servant. However, relaxations were extended to disabled personnel from the armed forces, who could keep one manservant free from tax. The valet to such a man also rendered personal help as required and in general slept either in his chambers or just outside his room.

Lady housekeeper played a vital role in the household. One of her qualifications was her lineage. She, unlike other members of the staff hailed from a better family; she was elderly, experienced person and sometimes a widow. Just like an executive in large aristocratic mansions she would be busy planning everything, shopping daily necessities and importantly hiring suitable servants or dismissing them if necessary. In relatively smaller household this housekeeper was assisted by a couple of servants and looked after children if the mistress of the house was dead. She was a person who could command respect even when she lived with a widower.

A cook's duty was to prepare meals in ordinary households. In larger households they needed an accomplished chef who knew how to cater to dignitaries and valued guests. They also took care of kitchen and pantry supplies and supervised them himself. An accomplished chef invariably began her careers as an apprentice under a seasoned cook in a wealthy household. Unlike today the cook was expected to prepare every essential item that was absolutely necessary during meals like pickles, jams, jellies, soups, confectioneries, and the like. Cooks kept notebooks to jot down every vital data. Like butlers they were allowed to sell any leftovers of tallow.

In larger households' cooks were busy cooking but in smaller ones they often played with little children. The scullery maid was engaged in scrubbing and cleaning floors, stairs, washing plates utensils etc.

Housemaids saw to cleaning rooms. In absence of manservants, they brought coals and lit fires and lamps, emptied garbage bins. The parlour maids were slightly higher at household hierarchy. She opened the doors, waited on at the table, brought tea and refreshment to the table. Victorian servants were expected to be seen as little as possible but the parlourmaid often

showed up before the guests. Hence the master wanted her to be good looking, presentable and well mannered.

The lady's maid was a naturally higher position amongst all other servants because of her proximity to the mistress herself. Like the valet she would be educated; in charge of personal needs of the mistress; took care of her clothing, dress, make up, hair dressing. she made her bed. The maid also tended pets. She was also a kind of dressmaker and was allowed to wear the leftover garments and sometimes run down dresses of her mistress. She mended some dresses and wore them and sold out the rest. The school room maid was a type of lady's maid, who looked after one or two teenagers.

Wages and salaries differed among servants widely because of their skills, commitment, and experiences. Servants were provided free board and food and therefore their salaries were a little low.

The standard attire for a servant girl was washable cotton dress with stripes or print with an apron or pinafore and a cap which they wore in the morning while washing up. Servants who kept themselves busy in the evenings wore black dress. For young girls, procuring their own garments and uniforms was not easy and therefore these were provided by the master himself. Young girls when not in town, sometimes sought employment in the farms in the country. During Christmas it was traditional for the employers to clothe them with new material, suiting their age and physical demeanour.

Male servants except for valets and butlers got their uniforms from their employers. Coachmen were lucky in a sense that they would get a spare room above the stables or free cottage and therefore were in a position to keep family. Other servants were naturally expected to remain free from family obligations. However, they could maintain their ties or connections with their families at faraway places. Most of the servants eyed tips because it always supplemented their low incomes. Rich visiting guests who stayed for a long time often remunerated them handsomely. Gifts from the employer were however reserved for special occasions like weddings and child births. When the family was away the servants would get extra allowances and they engaged themselves in thorough cleaning and redecorating the house. They used their additional spare time to amuse themselves which they could never think of doing otherwise when the master was around. During summer servants were given some holidays to go and meet their families in the country

The Victorian wealth and material prosperity was well stood upon a solid base of a large army of servants. These servants of all ages out of poverty sought employment, sought jobs at affluent houses both in city and country. They committed their years of toil and loyalty to their masters but when they grew old and lost much of physical strength and promptitude they were released from these households, mostly without much savings of their own and there were no retirement benefits either. There was naturally no place, no door to turn to. Many retired servants could have the option to reunite with their families in the villages or small towns but even those families had become distant to them. Hence their own children and grand children turned their faces from them as these servants were construed sheer burdens to them. In cities there were no homes for them except for workhouses and poor houses where they could spend the rest of their lives in utter hardship. These workhouses could only expedite their death. These houses were often packed with many such destitutes and retired servants with no

medical or old age care. Dickens portrayed these workhouses in many of his stories vividly and this was one among the harshest realities of the day. The Victorian domestic servants and their structure continued till almost the end of the first world war after which many social and economic changes changed Britain once and for all. After the second world war this system almost disappeared.

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