And Even When You Find It...

...it's still a problem, observes *Diana West*

The English nanny, her reputation enhanced by an amalgam of fictional characters, has long been institutionalized, even Disneyfied, into brand-name saintliness. Of course, some of these literary characters are themselves a bit strange, such as dear, odd Mary Poppins. Then there's *Peter Pan* and Wendy's devoted Nana, who was, after all, a black Newfoundland dog. It was probably Charles Dickens who created the line's progenitor with such characters as Miss Pross (*A Tale of Two Cities*) and Peggotty (*David Copperfield*), exemplars of the starched, lion-hearted devotion which late twentieth-century mothers can only dream of in their quest for better child care.

Dream on. Such dedicated self-sacrifice is not to be found in today's American-style nanny, a.k.a "caregiver," who, despite a job title that sounds as if it might be performed by a worker bee, is usually a fully enfranchised American citizen (or so one tells the IRS). Tocqueville had it figured out 150 years ago when he explained that selflessness for hire exists only in aristocracies where the servant class, as permanent as the ruling class, tends to identify with its masters—at least, one might add, until the revolution.

Since "servants" have become almost as démodé as "masters," the hierarchy that once supported their symbiotic relationship—Tocqueville's "strange medley of two existences"—is not only antiquated, it's extinct. If one

Mrs. Everest, nanny to Winston Churchill

is prepared to treat Southern slavery as a separate subject, aristocratic hierarchy never found a firm foothold in this country (Kennedy worship notwithstanding). Thus, as M. E. Sherwood, a social arbiter of the Gilded Age, put it, "It is to be feared that the Declaration of Independence is between us and good service."

Once upon a time, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, it was considered almost un-American to hire domestic help, the notion of "staff" being too closely associated with the British way of life. Mercifully, such idealism quickly compromised itself, although the fashion in the nation's early days was to de-emphasize pomp and livery. After the Civil War, the "hired girl" was etymologically transformed into the "maid," a distinctly European term that mirrored the new class-puffing pretentiousness that Mrs. Sherwood documented in two popular etiquette books.

When Mrs. Sherwood was writing in the 1890s, the pool of domestic help came almost exclusively from Europe. Mrs. Sherwood offered her readers a taxonomy of the different nationalities and their propensities to serve: British nannies, housekeepers, and butlers knew their place; French lady's maids were inclined to treachery; and German servants might turn out to be Nihilists—"a dreadful possibility." Off-the-boat Irish filled out the household complement from gardeners to scullions, although they required much training, after which they were likely to move on to better jobs in shops and factories. Hence the lady's lament: A secure place on the lower rung of domestic service paled next to the higher reaches of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Mrs. Sherwood's take on the democratic domestic quandary—having help and equality, too—resonates to this day. Class structure still inserts itself in the running of household staff, even when that staff is composed of just one person. No longer, however, is it the household employee who is electrified by the notion of equality; in the late twentieth century, it is the employer who is transfixed, even paralyzed, by it.

Recall that by the end of the last century, the "hired girl" had turned into a "maid." One hundred years and

countless raised-consciousnesses later, no Americans have "maids," excepting, of course, *Latin* Americans, but that's another story. The word "maid," far from reflecting glory on the lady of the house as it once did, is something from which modern women tend to recoil as a gruesome reminder of the inequalities that persist even in this determinedly egalitarian society. Hiring someone to change sheets or diapers reintroduces a most politically incorrect social structure: a pecking order that is awkward when it is not downright embarrassing.

Amid a sprinkling of European au pairs (sullen teens with charming accents), the bulk of the domestic work force is composed of women from the Third World. Having crossed oceans and land masses to earn dollars for their families back home, they have little or no thought of American social mobility. Conscious or not, an employer's guilty sense of reverse colonialism makes for an uneasy relationship; it further clouds the enigmatic lines of household command that have become increasingly obscured by a cultural aversion to authority in general. Whether the employee is from Paris or Pakistan, simple orders from the enlightened employer become pleading requests: "Could you—*would you*—mind (if you have some time) cleaning the oven?" Or: "Could you not—*would it be okay if you didn't*—speak Tagalog to the baby? Her brain is extremely receptive to language right now, and Tagalog is...great but...okay?" (a brave smile). This is not the way the same lady talks to either her lawyer or her dry cleaner.

The modern matron, struck all but speechless by the intimacy of the work required and the drudgery such work demands, finds herself a-dither. Ovens must be cleaned, diapers must be changed. What to do? She hires someone for the housework (and to help with the kids), or someone else for the kids (who does housework on the side). But wasn't the technological revolution supposed to set all of us free? Apparently, it didn't—excepting, of course, the matron herself who has been liberated to pursue a career. To make that professional life possible, in spite of the best of democratic intentions, she must introduce and preside over an archaic social hierarchy in her own home.

The much-vaunted English nanny is not the answer, either. If anything, she is even more of a problem. Tom Wolfe trots one out for a cameo in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* who, far from being a pleasant, porridge-dolloping breeze of crisp authority, is instead a repository of stale snobbery that produces pangs of miserable inadequacy in a couple of over-extended, under-cultured Manhattanites:

"They called her Glenda. She called them Mr. Kramer and Mrs. Kramer, instead of Larry and Rhoda. Everything was upside down. Glenda was the very picture of gentility, having tea, while Mr. Kramer, lord of the ant colony, came tramping through to the bathroom bare-footed, bare-legged, tousle-headed, wearing a tattered old plaid bathrobe." Talk about reverse colonialism.

As MRS. SHERWOOD understood, the makeshift hierarchies that exist in this country do so on shaky ground. Employers who casually mention having "someone who comes on Fridays" find themselves tongue-tied when they have to boil "someone" down to a more specific noun. But which noun? "Cleaning lady" is a respectable choice, although the more squeamish will shrink from its menial implications, not to mention the freighted meanings of the word "lady." A neighbor of mine refers to her "father's cleaner-helper-person," which of course not only hitches together bits of gender-neutral euphemism, but returns all responsibility for the labor arrangement to the patriarchal unit. "Live-in" is commonly used, although it still begs the question: live-in what? The term of consensus seems to be "housekeeper," despite the inaccuracy of this distinctly managerial title.

In its inaccuracy, however, lies its virtue. As far as the sensitive, correct, modern employer is concerned, calling a "maid" a "housekeeper" elevates that employee's stature and enhances her dignity. No longer is she someone who labors so that her employer may join the executive set; she's a manager, too! But in this assuredly well-meaning job description lurks a hidden element of selfishness. Having boosted the worker's paper status to her own satisfaction, the employer has reduced her intense personal discomfort with their relative places in the social hierarchy, thereby minimizing, by dint of diction, its very existence.

But, as they say, actions speak louder than misnomers. "Housewife" and "housekeeper" may on the surface sound like colleagues—peers, even—but in practice one peer still tells the other peer what to do, or at least tries to (if it's not too much trouble). Maybe this isn't as it should be; it certainly isn't as we are taught. But neither euphemism nor good intentions alter the fact that there's dirty work to be done and the lady of the house wants someone else to do it. ◆

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Why Me?

The editor's mother, *Yvonne Crittenden*, recalls a generation of women who did more and moaned less

In the bad old days of the 1930s and '40s, my mother, a suburban Australian housewife, employed servants. They were not called servants, of course. Australians, being chauvinistically proud of their perceived lack of subservience to England, the mother country ("Bloody Poms!"), nonetheless aped all its customs and traditions while pretending not to. My middle-class parents did not have a lot of money, but having domestic help was not considered a luxury back then, even when mothers stayed home, as mine and every other child's did, unless they were single parents and had to work.

I vaguely remember a succession of fresh-faced country "girls" who came in when my brother, sister, and I were little, to help with the laundry, the cleaning, the cooking, and the occasional baby-sitting. Once we were in school, the servants disappeared and my only memories of what would now be called "substitute care" were the odd baby-sitter at night, and being dropped off once in a while in the city (Melbourne) at a "crèche" while my mother was shopping. These crèches were a bit like today's ubiquitous indoor playgrounds, but spartan in comparison, with a few broken toys, and not remembered with fondness.

When I emigrated to Canada in the mid-1950s, I dropped out of my news reporting job (we didn't pursue "careers") to have children. I was happy to stay home and raise my son and daughter for seven years, until they were both settled in school. This, too, was the norm for most of my generation. Becoming a full-time mom, after working from the age of sixteen, was a joy and fulfillment I didn't think twice about, although money was tight. My husband and I lived in rented apartments with little furniture, had no car, walked to stores, and traveled by public transit, even for summer holidays, when we'd haul the kids on a bus and journey to a rented cottage north on one of Ontario's many lakes.

The first time I had to hire help was when my husband, then a news editor, inexplicably decided the way to make our fortune was to buy a rooming house. His family in Australia had once owned lucrative hotels and guest houses, and although they had lost everything in the Depression, there seemed to be a landlord gene in him and his brothers. So, with a tiny down-payment, we bought a rooming house in a respectable part of Toronto, and found ourselves suddenly with a huge mortgage and instant landlords to some thirteen bachelors.

The large house was subdivided, with accommodation ranging from single rooms to one-bedroom suites with kitchens and bathrooms. A communal kitchen and several hall bathrooms served the single roomers. "Maid service" was included in the rent, and if we were to keep our tenants and pay down the mortgage, we would have to continue to provide this luxury.

The nine months we owned the rooming house were one of the darkest periods of my life, partly because of irresponsible tenants who routinely defaulted on their rent, sometimes decamping in the night owing us weeks' worth of money. This was easy to do since we didn't live on the

Drawings by Yuri Kolyadenko