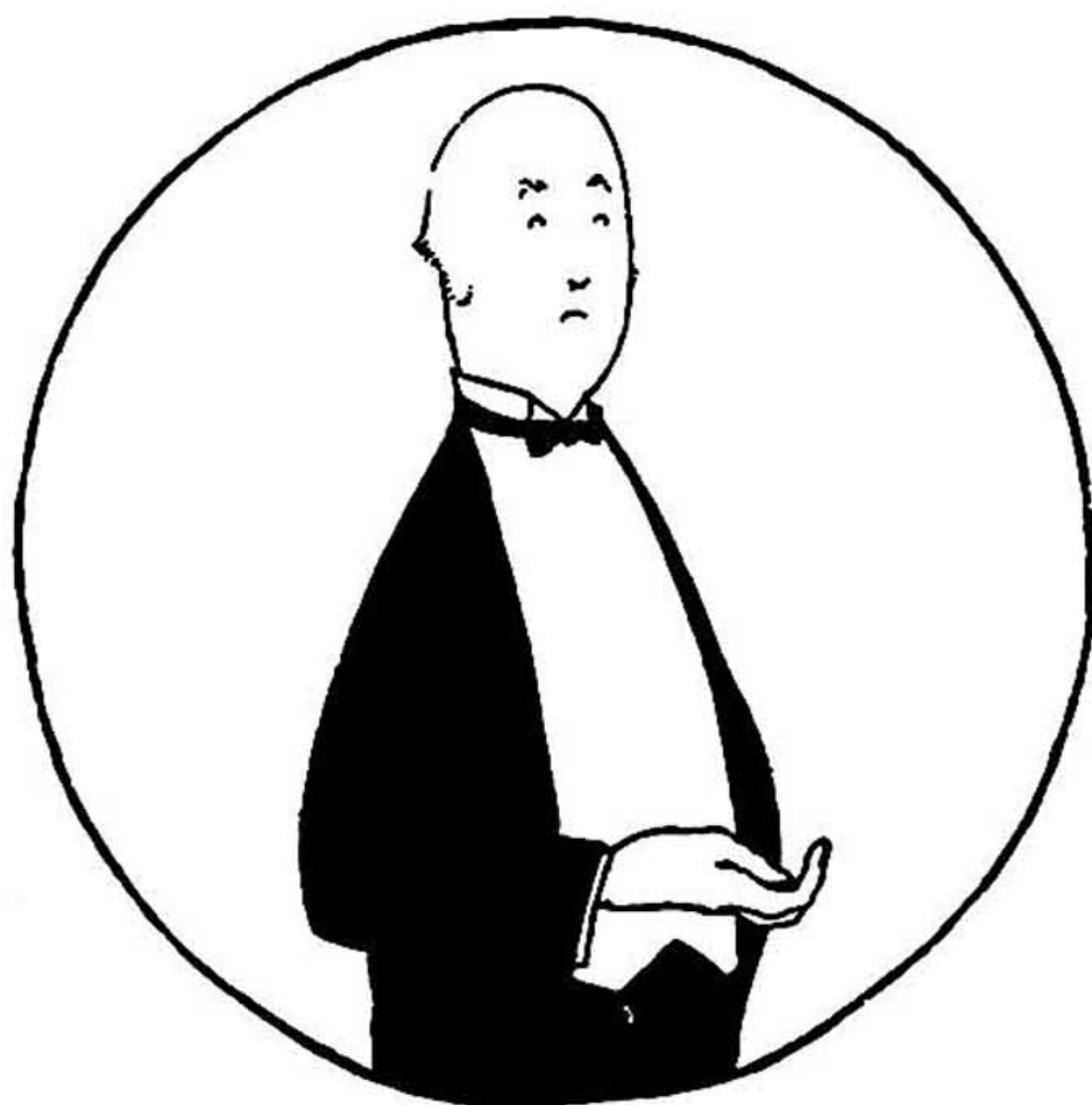


V A N I T Y F A I R

February, 1916

ALL ABOUT BUTLERS

*And a Word on
How to be Butttled*



Mergleson, or perhaps even Spink

Drawn by Fish

IT has always seemed to me one of the most bitter ironies of life on this terrestrial globe of ours that the intellectual poor, who are endowed with the intelligence necessary for the proper appreciation of butlers and the imagination to enjoy them to the full, should be so confoundedly hard up that they cannot afford them: while the dull and stupid rich, to whom there is no poetry or romance in a butler, are never without one.

For, hard as it is to be a good butler, it is still harder to be—if I may use the expression—a good butttlee. It is not easy to butttle, but it is still more difficult to be butttled to.

As an instance of what I mean, take the case of some rich Western acquaintances of mine who awoke one morning in the midst of the enjoyment of their newly-gotten wealth, to find that a butler had almost imperceptibly insinuated himself into the home. Some are born to butlers, others achieve butlers, and others have butlers thrust upon them. In the daily recriminations which followed Mergleson's arrival, each of the family denied hotly that he or she had been responsible for his engagement. It was tacitly understood in the end that nobody had engaged him, but that he had just materialized like some noxious vapor given out by their piled-up riches.

BE that as it may, from the moment of his arrival, happiness took to itself wings. Mergleson had lived with a Duke and, on the occasions when I dined with these acquaintances of mine, it would have touched a far harder heart than mine to observe the way in which they cringed before the man. They congealed before his cold blue eye. They quailed at the proximity of his bulging waistcoat. If conversation became for an instant free and un-self-conscious, it collapsed as if it had been sand-bagged at the sound of Mergleson's quiet, disapproving "Sherry or Hock, sir?" Sometimes, out of sheer bravado, one of the sons, in the devil-may-care way of youth, would begin a funny story—only to subside before the almost inaudible cough in the background—the cough which seemed to say "Pardon me, but this sort of thing would hardly have done for His Grace!"

I FORGET how the thing ended. They could not have shot him, or I should have seen it in the papers. They could not have given him notice, for they had not the nerve. I imagine that they talked the thing over, and one night, having made sure that he was asleep, they all packed their suit-cases and sneaked back to the West.

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How to be Butttled

I merely mention the affair to prove my point that it is not every man who is capable of being butttled to, and that mere wealth should not be permitted to corner the butler market, as it is under the present slipshod conditions of Society. Within a biscuit throw of the house of these wretched creatures there must have been dozens of men to whom Mergleson would have been a comfort and a boon. Some day, no doubt, there will be some sort of Fund, or Institution, for supplying the deserving poor with butlers. Public examinations will be held periodically, and those who pass them will receive these human prizes quite independently of their means.

Roughly, the examination would run along on these lines:

QUESTION. What would you do if you met a butler unexpectedly on a little used staircase?

ANSWER. (*adjudged correct by the examiners*) I should either (a) stare haughtily at the man or (b) say genially "Ah, Stimson!" (*adjudged incorrect by the examiners*) (a) faint, (b) do a Steve Brodie over the balusters.

QUESTION. Is familiarity with a butler ever permissible?

ANSWER. (*adjudged correct by the examiners*) Certainly. All butlers are interested in racing and the stock market. It is perfectly in order to say to a butler (a) "Oh, Spink! Before I forget. Bet your very B.V.D.'s on Douglinut in the third race" or (b) "Very unsettled, the market, this afternoon, Spink—very unsettled!" (*adjudged incorrect by the examiners*) Only in an assumed voice, over the telephone.

QUESTION. What services may a man legitimately demand of a butler?

ANSWER. (*adjudged correct by the examiners*) (a) the supplying of a light for a cigar; (b) a jerk at the collar of one's overcoat when one has just got the darned thing on; (c) a corroboration of one's suspicion that the weather is threatening. (*adjudged incorrect by the examiners*) None.

IT is one of the compensations of increasing age that fear of butlers as a class decreases and, in due season—as the hair grows sparser and the figure more abundant—vanishes altogether. But it may be taken as an axiom that a man under the age of twenty-five who says he is not afraid of an English butler is lying. In my own case I was well over thirty before I could convince myself, when paying a social call, that the reason the butler looked at me in that cold and distant way was that it was his normal expression and not because he knew that I was overdrawn at the bank; had pressed my trousers under the mattress, and was trying to make last year's hat do for another season. The sting has passed now, but I freely admit that my nonage, that period of life which should be all joy and optimism, was almost completely soured by the feeling that, while we lunched, the butler was making silent but adverse comments to the footman on the peculiar shape of my head.

It amuses me when, as sometimes happens, I hear thoughtless persons criticizing butlers on the absurd ground that they are useless encumbrances. There is one unanswerable retort to such carpers—to wit, abolish butlers, and what would become of the drama? You might just as well expect playwrights to get along without stage telephones. A butler is indispensable to nine plays out of ten. Cut him out, and who is to enter rooms at critical moments when, if another word were spoken, the play would end immediately? Who is to fill in the gaps by coming on with a tray? Who is to explain to the audience at the opening of a farce that the Maarster is not on good terms with his wife and was out late last night? Ridiculous!

Dramatists realize this, and of late years it has been rare to find a butler-less play. In a

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way this is a pity. In the old days butlers were confined to English comedies, which made it very convenient, for, directly you saw one come on the stage, you were able to say to yourself "So this is going to be an English comedy, is it?" and steal away to a burlesque show while there was still time to escape.

BUTLERS are popular in the motion-picture world, but the composers of scenarios appear to have but a sketchy idea of what their actual duties are. Outside of a film drama it is rarely that one sees a butler—in Dundreary whiskers and a zebra-striped waistcoat—announce a visitor and stand listening to the ensuing conversation with his elbows at right angles to his body and with his chin rigidly held on an approximate level with his shimmering forehead.

In the movies he does nothing else.

But, after all, the stage has made equally bad mistakes in this particular line. It used to be a stage tradition that if ever misfortune hit the home the butler came forward and in a few neat words offered his employers his savings to help them over the crisis. In real life butlers are almost unbelievably slow to take their cue on such occasions. When I was caught short of Bethlehem Steel, my first act was to apprise my own Keggs of the fact. "Keggs," I said more than once, "I have had very serious losses in the market." "Indeed, sir?" said the worthy fellow. "I hardly know where to turn for the stuff," I said. "Yes sir?" "I am ruined, Keggs, absolutely ruined!" "Very good, sir." Finally I grew tired of delicate innuendo. "Keggs," I said, "if you could see your way to letting me have those savings of yours——" Something like emotion animated the man's mask-like face. His mouth quivered. "No, sir, thank you, sir," he said in a low, distinct voice. "Not if I know it, sir! And I should like to give a week's notice, sir."

You cannot rely on the drama as a guide when dealing with butlers.

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