

# The Victorian Servant

by Rachelle Spiegel

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## Servants' Dress

While servants were common in all societies, the Victorian Servant, as exemplified in novels, TV, movies and theater is generally a product of British aristocratic society. The difficult life of the lower classes in this period made a position as a servant in a good household a much-desired position. The bulk of information easily available regarding the Victorian servant discusses their situation in a British household. While there were also servants in America, the practices were somewhat less strict and the number of servants in a household generally smaller. (Charles Dana Gibson's drawings are a good source of visual information on the American servant as he often included servants in his illustrations.)

A great number of servants were employed in a large household. They usually consisted of a house steward, butler, valet and a male or female cook. There might be about 6 kitchen helpers (male and female), including a "tweeny" or scullery maid. There were a number of footmen, an usher in livery and a page. There would also be the housekeeper, the lady's maid and a parlour maid. Housemaids or chamber maids would keep the rooms clean and there might be laundry and stillroom maids as well. There would also be a nursery staff if there were children. It was headed by the children's nurse (in the later period known as a nanny) and sometimes a schoolroom staff, which might include a French governess and a schoolroom maid.

If outdoor servants were employed, these might include a "tiger" (a groom who goes out with a vehicle driven by his master, who takes care of the vehicle when the master went about his business. The term "tiger" derived from the tigers in circus wagons, who would be driven about in the streets to advertise a show. There might also be stable grooms, coachmen and gardeners.

In small middle class households, where only one male servant could be kept, his occupation in the country might be groom or gamekeeper in the morning and footman and butler in the afternoon.

## The Butler



During the Victorian era households would employ as many servants as the family could afford. According to 'The Guild of Professional Butlers', still in existence in England; "The middle classes employed as many servants as possible to demonstrate their newfound wealth and status. The lower classes or poorer families sacrificed living standards just to employ one." The aristocracy had always employed many servants.

The butler was in charge of the servants' hall and was responsible for the footman, custody of the plate and the control of the cellar. He would brew the servants' beer, arrange the dinner table, announce the dinner and carve the joints in fashionable homes where dinner was served from side tables. He wore tails and a black tie as he stood at the door to announce that dinner was served. The butler's suit, however, was of less expensive material than his master's and the aim in the 19th century was to have a gentlemanly appearance without being mistaken for a gentleman. As one guide to his duties put it "He should be simply dressed in the plainest and best-fitting of all thoroughly plain evening dresses."

Arthur Inch, interviewed by author Frank Victor Dawes, for his book **Not in Front of the Servants: a true portrait of upstairs downstairs life**, describes the life of a butler as told to him by his father who was employed as a butler from 1890 to 1934. "It was a hard life in some ways; his father never had a lot of time off and never had a holiday. But once a butler, Mr Inch's father did little actual work and no dirty or hard work at all. His main function was admirably summed up 'by Williams' in a little handbook handed down to Mr. Inch by his father: 'Like the footman, the butler has to perform many duties in small families not generally considered as belonging to his position in large establishments. But in all establishments it is his duty to rule. In large establishments more particularly,

this exercise of judicious power will be greatly required; for under servants are never even comfortable, much less happy, under lax management....".

## The Parlour Maid



In matters of dress, the Victorians liked their servants to be immediately recognizable. In the eighteenth century and early part of the nineteenth, servant girls had no standardized uniform and were expected to dress plainly in common working dresses, with quilted petticoats, worsted stockings and leather shoes. Although girls who tried to look like ladies were strongly disapproved of, the gentry often considered it a matter of personal prestige to have well-dressed servants and often gave their employees their own cast-off clothes; sometimes as a reward for good service, but often as a matter of course. The Victorians were sticklers for what was 'right and proper' to wear for servants. Girls were admonished, while they were in service, not to copy the ladies. Servants who liked to dress in style were looked upon as likely to end up as 'fallen women.' This attitude persisted into the 1920's and 1930's when class distinctions in female dress were becoming more and more blurred. Girls were still being urged to equate silk underwear with sin.

Employers were often unable to control their employees' dress when off the job, but at work, strict rules of dress were maintained. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the maidservant's uniform was well established. The maid had to have three sets of clothing packed into her little tin trunk when she 'went into service'; cotton print dresses for mornings, black dresses with white caps and fancy aprons for afternoons and her own outdoor clothes. Employers were apt to forget that behind the starched uniforms there were people with human feelings like their own. The uniform assumed such importance in the order of things that it became a nation-wide standard practice at Christmas time to present the maid with a length of print dress material, with which to renew her uniform and to be made up at her own expense. In fact, maids often resented that they had to pay

for their uniforms while most menservants were provided with theirs by their employers.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century maid's dress varied according to her duties and her employer's status. The parlour maid was required to be tall, as at times she was called upon to replace a footman. An upper level servant; she was frequently in contact with her mistress and in the absence of a footman she might wait at table, usher in guests or even answer the door. Consequently she had to appear tidy and well dressed at all times.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, changing (clothing) in the afternoon became an established rule and at teatime the parlour maids had to reappear in black. Towards the end of the century, the apron had a bib secured by cross straps behind. Sometimes it was trimmed with a frill. According to a Miss Helen Fox of Sussex, "In very smart houses during Edwardian times there was a phase when the afternoon uniform of the parlour maid was changed from black and white to some other more artistic, but still dark, shade with toning apron, cap and cuffs. But only in very 'smart' houses run by rather 'advanced' ladies would this be apparent."

Indoor caps were worn by all servants. Earlier in the century, the typical headgear was a mobcap. Closer to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a lace cap with streamers became more prevalent. The typical outdoor dress was usually a shawl and a straw bonnet over the indoor cap.

## The Nanny



The Nanny was the Victorian head 'nurse'. In larger, wealthier homes there might be a nursery staff which included nursery maids, schoolroom staff (governess), and sometimes a French "bonne". Nannies and governess were in their own class. They were not family, but weren't considered truly servants and often had lonely lives; they ate and sometimes slept with the children. They usually were from higher-

class homes (children of tradesmen or impoverished gentry) than the other servants and were better educated.

Indoor caps were usually worn by all types of female servants, the typical headgear being a mobcap. Closer to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and later, a lace cap with streamers was also used. The outdoor dress in general was usually a shawl and a straw bonnet over the indoor cap,

Various sources describe the 'standard dress' for Nannies with differing details. One account describes the Nanny as dressed in blue linen with a smartly starched apron and cap. Another states that the Nanny always wore a white dress and voluminous apron indoors but no cap. Outdoors she wore a gray, dark blue or plum coat and in both the Victorian and Edwardian periods a black straw bonnet with white muslin strings. Frank Victor Dawes in his social history Not in Front of the Servants: a true portrait of Upstairs, downstairs life, comments: "Rules about nursemaids wearing hats when they took children out for a walk in the park were strict. They wore black straw hats which had to be kept firmly in position even when 'out to tea' with the children and wore the outdoor uniform of grey coats and skirts."

Photos and drawings from the period offer a wide variety of styles for the Nanny; dresses without aprons, print dresses with large aprons, white starched collar, and cuffs, etc. Most printed source material is in black and white. Except for paintings of the period we must rely upon verbal descriptions for color. We have the choice in dressing our dolls of slavishly following one of the above descriptions to the best of our ability, or of using artistic license and choosing styles and colors that will harmonize with our settings.



All settings created and costumes designed and executed by the author. Porcelain poured and painted by Jan Smith from commercial molds. For information on costuming kits for clothing pictured, please email the author.

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