

The New York World
October 30, 1887

Trying to Be A Servant

Nellie Bly's Strange Experience at Two Employment Agencies

She Pays a Dollar to the Agent and is Guaranteed a Situation—She Has No References—The Agent Knows Nothing of Her Character—Nevertheless, He Declares to a Customer that She Possess All the Virtues in the Calendar—Can a Common Thief Thus Recommended Get Service in New York Homes?—How Applicants Are Treated—The Agency Sure to Make Money Whether the Girls Get Places or Not—The Out-of-Town Trick—A Weary Waiting for Work—Queer Experiences

No one but the initiated know what a great question the servant question is and how many perplexing sides it has. The mistresses and servants, of course, fill the leading roles. Then, in the lesser, but still important parts, come the agencies, which, despite the many voices clamoring against them, declare themselves public benefactors. Even the "funny man" manages to fill a great deal of space with the subject. It is a serious question, since it affects all one holds dear in life—one's dinner, one's bed and one's linen. I had heard so many complaints from long-suffering mistresses, worked-out servants, agencies and lawyers that I determined to investigate the subject to my own satisfaction. There was only one way to do it. That was to personate a servant and apply for a situation. I knew that there might be such a thing as "references" required, and, as I had never tested my abilities in this line, I did not know how to furnish them. Still, it would not do to allow a little thing like a "reference" to stop me in my work, and I would not ask any friend to commit herself to further my efforts. Many girls must at one time be without references, I thought, and this encouraged me to make the risk.

On Monday afternoon a letter came to THE WORLD office from a lawyer complaining of an agency where, he claimed, a client of his had paid for a servant, and the agent then refused to produce a girl. This shop I decided to make my first essay. Dressed to look the character I wanted to represent, I walked up Fourth avenue until I found No. 69, the place I wanted. It was a low frame building, which retained all the impressions of old age. The room on the first floor was filled with a conglomeration of articles which gave it the appearance of a second-hand store. By a side door, leaning against the wall, was a large sign which told the passing public that that was the entrance to the "Germania Servants' Agency." On a straight, blue board, fastened lengthwise to a second-story window, was in large, encouraging white letters, the ominous word, "Servants."

I entered the side door, and as there was nothing before me but the dirty, uncarpeted hall and a narrow-rickety-looking staircase, I went on to my fate. I passed two closed doors on the first landing and on the third I saw the word "Office." I did not knock, but turned the knob of the door, and, as it stuck top and bottom, I pressed my shoulder against it. It gave way, so did I, and I entered on my career as a servant with a tumble. It was a small room with a low ceiling, a dusty ingrain carpet and cheaply papered walls. A heavy railing and a high desk and counter which

divided the room gave it the appearances of a police court. Around the walls were hung colored advertisements of steamship lines and maps. Above the mantel, which was decorated with two plaster-paris busts, was a square sheet of white paper. I viewed the large black letters on this paper with a quaking heart. "References Investigated!!" with two exclamation points. Now, if it had only been put quietly and mildly, or even with one exclamation point, but two—dreadful. It was a death-warrant to the idea I had of writing my own references if any were demanded.

A young woman who was standing with a downcast head by the window turned to look at the abrupt newcomer. A man who had apparently been conversing with her, came hastily forward to the desk. He was a middle-sized man, with a sharp gray eye, a bald head, and a black frock coat buttoned up tightly, showing to disadvantage his rounded shoulders.

QUESTIONED IN THE AGENCY

"Well?" he said to me in a questioning manner, as he glanced quickly over my "get up."

"Are you the man who gets places for girls?" I asked, as if there were but one such man.

"Yes, I'm the man. Do you want a place?" he asked, with a decidedly German twang.

"Yes, I want a place," I replied.

"What did you work at last?"

"Oh, I was a chambermaid. Can you get me a position, do you think?"

"Yes, I can do that," he replied. "You're a nice-looking girl and I can soon get you a place. Just the other day I got a girl a place for \$20 a month, just because she was nice-looking. Many gentlemen, and ladies also, will pay more if the girls are nice looking. Where did you work?"

"I worked in Atlantic City," I said, with a mental cry for forgiveness.

"Have you no city reference?" he asked.

"No, none whatever, but I prefer the city, that's why I came here."

"Well, I can get you a position," he said, "but some people are mighty particular about references."

"Have you no place you can send me to now?" I said, determined to get at my business as soon as possible.

"You have to pay to get your name entered on the book first," he said, opening a large ledger, as he asked, "What is your name?"

"How much do you charge?" I asked, in order to give me time to decide on a name.

"I charge you one dollar for the use of the bureau for a month, and if I get you a big salary you will have to pay more."

"How much more?"

"That depends entirely on your salary," he answered, non-committal. "Your name?"

SHE PAYS THE REQUIRED DOLLAR

"Now, if I give you a dollar you will assure me a situation?"

"Certainly; that's what I'm here for."

"And you guarantee me work in this city?" I urged.

"Oh, certainly, certainly; that's what this agency is for. I'll get you a place, sure enough."

"All right. I'll give you a dollar, which is a great deal for a girl out of work. My name is Sally Lees."

“What shall I put you down for?”

“Oh, anything,” I replied, with a generosity that surprised myself.

“Then I shall put it chambermaid, waitress, nurse or seamstress.” So my name, or the one assumed, was entered in the ledger and as I paid my dollar I ventured the information that if he gave me a situation directly I should be pleased to give him more money. He warmed up at this and told me he should advertise me in the morning.

“Then you have no one in want of help now?”

“We have plenty of people, but not just now. They all come in the morning. This is too late in the day. Where are you boarding?”

At this moment a woman clad in a blue dress, with a small, black shawl wrapped around her, entered from a room in the rear. She also looked me over sharply, as if I was an article for sale, as the man told her in German all that he knew about me.

“You can stay here,” she said in broken, badly broken English, after she had learned that I was friendless in the city. “Where is your baggage?”

“I left my baggage where I paid for my lodging tonight,” I answered. They tried to induce me to stop at their house., Only \$2.50 a week, with board, or 20 cents a night for a bed. They urged that it was immaterial to them, only I had a better chance to secure work if I was always there; it was only for my own good they suggested it. I had one glance of the adjoining bedroom, and that sight made me firm in my determination to sleep elsewhere.

THE RECEIPT

As the evening drew on I felt that they would have no more applications for servants that afternoon, and after asking the hour that I should return in the morning, I requested a receipt for my money. “You don’t need to be so particular,” he said, crossly, but I told him I was, and insisted until he was forced to comply. It was not much of a receipt. He wrote on the blank side of the agency’s advertising card:

*Sally Lee has paid \$1. Good for one month use of bureau.
69 4th ave.*

On the following morning, about 10.30, I made my appearance at the agency. Some eight or ten girls were in the room, and the man who had pocketed my fee on the previous afternoon still adorned the throne back of the desk. No one said good morning, or anything else for that matter, so I quietly slid onto a chair near the door. The girls were all comfortably dressed, and looked as if they had enjoyed hearty breakfasts. All sat silent, with a dreamy expression on their faces, except two who stood by the window watching the passing throng and conversing in whispers with one another. I wanted to be with or near them, so that I might hear what was said. After waiting for some time I decided to awake the man to the fact that I wanted work, not a rest.

“Have you no place to send me this morning?”

“No, but I advertised you in the paper,” and he handed me the *Tribune* of Oct. 25 and pointed out the following notice:

NURSE, &c—By excellent, very neat English girl as nurse and seamstress, chambermaid and waitress or parlor maid. Call at 69 4th ave., no cards answered.

I choked down a laugh as I read myself advertised in this manner, and wondered what my role would be next time. I began to hope someone would soon call for the excellent girl, but when an aged gentleman entered I wished just as fervently that he was not after me. I was enjoying my position too much, and I fear I could not restrain my gravity if any one began to question me. Poor old gentleman? He looked around helplessly as if he was at a loss to know what to do. The agent did not leave him long in doubt. "You want a girl, sir?"

THE AGENT FURNISHES REFERENCES

"Yes, my wife read an advertisement in the *Tribune* this morning and she sent me here to see the girl."

"Yes, yes, excellent girl, sir, come right back here," opening the gates and giving the gentleman a chair behind the high counter. "You come here, Sally Lees," indicating a chair beside the visitor for me. I sat down with an inward chuckle and the agent leaned over the back of a chair. The visitor eyed me nervously, and after clearing his throat several times and making vain attempts at beginning he said:

"You are the girl who wants work?" And after I answered in the affirmative he said: "Of course you know how to do all these things—you know what is required of a girl?"

"Oh, yes, I know," I answered confidently.

"Yes—well, how much do you want a month?"

"Oh, anything," I answered, looking to the agent for aid. He understood the look, for he began hurriedly:

"Fourteen dollars a month, sir. She is an excellent girl, good, neat, quick and of an amiable disposition."

I was astonished at his knowledge of my good qualities, but I maintained a lofty silence.

"Yes, yes," the visitor said musingly. "My wife only pays \$10 a month, and then if the girl is all right she is willing to pay more, you know. I really couldn't, you know—"

"We have no ten-dollar girls here, sir," said the agent with dignity. "You can't get an honest, neat and respectable girl for that mount."

"H'm, yes; well, this girl has good references, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, I know all about her," said the agent, briskly and confidently. "She is an excellent girl, and I can give you the best personal reference—the best of references."

Here I was, unknown to the agent. So far as he knew, I might be a confidence woman, a thief or everything wicked, and yet the agent was vowing that he had good personal references.

"Well, I live in Bloomfield, N.J., and there are only four in the family. Of course you are a good washer and ironer?" he said, turning to me. Before I had time to assure him of my wonderful skill in the line the agent interposed: "This is not the girl you want. No, sir, this girl won't do general housework. This is the girl you are after," bringing up another. "She does general housework," and he went on with a long list of her virtues, which were similar to those he had professed to find in me. The visitor got very nervous and began to insist that he could not take a girl unless his wife saw her first. Then the agent, when he found it impossible to make him take a girl, tried to induce the gentleman to join the bureau. "It will only cost you \$2 for the use of the bureau for a month," he urged, but the visitor began to get more nervous and to make his way to the door. I thought he was frightened because it was an agency, and it amused me to hear how earnestly he pleaded that really he dare not employ a girl without his wife's counsel.

SOME OF THE GIRLS' STORIES

After the escape of the visitor we all resumed our former positions and waited for another visitor. It came in the shape of a red-haired Irish girl.

"Well, you are back again?" was the greeting given her.

"Yes. That woman was horrible. She and her husband fought all the time and the cook carried tales to the mistress. Sure and I wouldn't live at such a place. A splendid laundress, with a good 'karacter,' don't need to stay in such places, I told them. The lady of the house made me wash every other day; then she wanted me to be dressed like a lady sure and wear a cap while I was at work. Sure and it's no good laundress who can be dressed up while at work, so I left her."

The storm had scarcely passed when another girl with fiery locks entered. She had a good face and a bright one, and I watched her closely.

"So you are back, too. You are troublesome," said the agent. Her eyes flashed, as she replied.

"Oh, I'm troublesome, am I? Well, you can take a poor girl's money, anyway, and then you tell her she's troublesome. It wasn't troublesome when you took my money, and where is the position? I have walked all over the city, wearing out my shoes and spending my money in carfare. Now, is this how you treat poor girls?"

"I did not mean anything by saying you were troublesome. That was only my fun," the agent tried to explain, and after a while the girl quieted down.

THE OUT-OF-TOWN TRICK

Another girl came and was told that, as she had not made her appearance the day previous she could not expect to obtain a situation. He refused to send her word if there was any chance. Then a messenger boy called and said that Mrs. Vanderpool, of No. 88 West Thirty-ninth street, wanted the girl advertised in the morning paper. Irish girl No. 1 was sent, and she returned, after several hours' absence, to say that Mrs. Vanderpool said, when she learned where the girl came from, that she knew all about agencies and their schemes and she did not propose to have a girl from them. The girl buttoned Mrs. Vanderpool's shoes and returned to the agency to take her post of waiting.

I succeeded at last in drawing one of the girls—Winifred Friel—into conversation. She said she had been waiting for several days and that she had no chance of a place yet. The agency had a place out of town to which they tried to force girls who declared they would not leave the city. Quite strange they never offered the place to girls who said they would work anywhere. Winifred Friel wanted it, but they would not allow her to go, yet they tried to insist on me accepting it.

"Well, now, if you won't take that I would like to see you get a place this winter," he said angrily, when he found that I would not go out of the city.

"Why, you promised that you would find me a situation in the city."

"That's no difference; if you won't take what I offer, you can do without," he said indifferently.

"Then give me my money," I said.

"No, you can't have your money. That goes into the bureau." I urged and insisted, to no avail, and so I left the agency to return no more.

AT ANOTHER AGENCY

My second day I decided to apply to another agency, so I went to Mrs. L. Seely's, No, 68 West Twenty-second street. I paid my dollar fee and was taken to the third story and put in a small room which was packed as close with women as sardines in a box. After edging my way in I was unable to move, so packed were we. A woman came up, and, calling me "that tall girl," told me roughly as I was new it was useless for me to wait there. Some of the girls said Mrs. Seely was always cross to them, and that I should not mind it. How horribly sitting those rooms were! There were fifty-two in the room with me, and the two other rooms I could look into were equally crowded, while groups stood on the stairs and in the hallway. It was a novel insight I got of life. Some girls laughed, some were sad, some slept, some ate and others read, while all sat from morning till night waiting a chance to earn a living. They are long waits, too. One girl had been there two months, others for days and weeks. It was good to see the glad look when called out to see a lady, and sad to see them return saying that they did not suit because they wore banks, or their hair in the wrong style, or that they looked bilious, or that they were too tall, too short, too heavy or too slender. One poor woman could not obtain a place because she wore mourning and so the objections ran.

I got no chance the entire day and I decided that I could not endure a second day in that human pack for two situations, so I resolved to follow the resolution of several of the other girls and try answering the advertisements in the morning papers. How I succeeded in this I shall tell some other time.