

THE COLUMBIAN SPY.

SAMUEL WRIGHT, Editor and Proprietor.

"NO ENTERTAINMENT IS SO CHEAP AS READING, NOR ANY PLEASURE SO LASTING."

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Selections.

Our Page.

BY C. F. WILLIAMS.

I decline to name the income on which Emma Maria and I married, lest the statement should have a tendency to reopen in these pages or elsewhere a certain discussion which attracted a good deal of attention some little time ago. It is sufficient for my purpose to declare, that its amount was such as to render us desirous of so arranging our prospective household affairs as to avoid all expense and absolutely necessary for comfort and propriety of appearance.—With reference to such arrangements our mutual friends and relatives favored us with a good deal of advice; and as there was considerable difference in the opinions expressed rendering it impossible for us, with the best intentions in the world, to follow every one's counsel, I need scarcely say that we managed to offend, more or less, about nine in every ten of those who were good enough to "take an interest in our welfare."

There was one point, however, on which a remarkable unanimity of opinion appeared to subsist: that point was "servants." It was demonstrated that we could not get along at all with only one, and, further, that we could not afford to keep two. This would at first sight appear rather a dilemma; not so, however. Two servants "proper" being clearly proved unobtainable, the alternative was as clearly proved to be one, and "a page." We were informed that an average female servant, at average wages, cost from thirty-five to forty pounds a year; but that a page—buttoned and ornamented to open the door and wait at table, unbuttoned and useful to clean knives and shoes, and so forth—was an article almost costless, and quite priceless, to young housekeepers.

I must affirm that I did not see the advantages of the proposed functionary in quite so strong a light as some of our advisers, so that it was more in deference to the opinion of others, the parents and guardians of my youth, than of my own free will, that I was induced to try the experiment. And oh! if I had had the smallest idea of what I was preparing for myself and Emma Maria, I would have quarreled with every relative I possessed in the world, rather than have taken the course I did. If the recital of a few of my miserable experiences (a very few, for a volume of this periodical might be filled without exhausting the subject) be the means of preventing any young couple from treading the same dreary path, I shall be amply rewarded. Oh! my young friends, if you would be happy, remain pageless!

Well, having settled upon keeping a page, the next question was how to procure one; and here an aunt of Emma Maria's (from whom she had expectations, never, alas! fulfilled) stepped forward. This old lady took an interest in an orphan asylum, the pupils of which being put out to service, were bound to their employers for a term of years; and it was represented to me that, in addition to suiting my own purpose, I should be assisting a deserving charity by taking a boy from the establishment. Accordingly, the week before we were married, Emma Maria and I, accompanied by her aunt, went to inspect the school. Sundry boys were called forward and put through their facings as it were, before us. Among these was one of the most ungainly youths I ever remember to have seen. His bones stuck out all over him in great lumps; his head was of the most peculiar shape—all angles where ordinary heads have curves; and there was that in his face which made me whisper to Emma Maria, in my dull way, that I was sure an admirably interesting melodramatic story might be written; suggested by his appearance, entitled "Skeggs; or, The Fatal Orphan." As he came from his seat toward us, he took the most exaggerated pains to tread on the tips of his toes, so as to avoid noise—a mode of progression which ended in his overbalancing, falling heavily against a desk, and eventually rolling up to Emma Maria's little boots, much to her alarm; though she could not help laughing when he had picked himself up, at his rueful expression, and the apple-like way in which he rubbed himself.

When we adjourned to the Superintendent's room, I was asked if I should like to select a boy. I modestly said that as I knew nothing about any of the youths, I should much prefer leaving it to the superintendent to send me one whom he could thoroughly recommend. He said he would think the matter over, and promised that we should find a boy at our house on our return from our wedding tour, which Emma Maria's aunt—who, I am bound to say, took a more leading part in the arrangement than I altogether approved of—had told him was at hand.

At that epoch, when we drove up to our door, behind the friends who were in the hall waiting to receive us, my eye discerned a well-remembered hideous face; and I involuntarily exclaimed, in a tone of horror—"Skeggs!" I thought Emma Maria would have fainted.

However, there was Skeggs, sure enough, resplendent in bright buttons, (I had made arrangements about the clothing question,) and on the mantelpiece was a note from the superintendent, stating that Skeggs' name was Bernard Wilkins, and that in his (the superintendent's) opinion, he was the very best boy for us.

Emma Maria was rather mollified by this note; she said Bernard was a nice name, and would sound so well. I had misgivings, but I only shook my head; after all, they were but misgivings; I knew nothing about the lad, and could hardly send him back because of his looks. Besides, we were to have him a month on trial before finding him for three years. I may state, too, that the resources of sartorial science had considerably diminished the angularity of his appearance.

During his month of probation, Skeggs so conducted himself as to cause me many pangs of self-reproach for my judgment of him. He was respectful and attentive—perhaps a shade too demonstratively so, though this may be an after thought, begotten of subsequent events. The knives and boots were resplendent; the door was "answered" without undue delay; and the maid-servant's report was in addition so favorable, that, on a certain day, I, the superintendent, and Skeggs, set our hands and seals respectively to a document whereby I bound myself to provide Skeggs with food, shelter and raiment, for three years—which was about the worst quarter of an hour's work I ever did.

Very shortly after this the perfidious hypocrite threw off the mask, openly stating to Mary, the maid-servant, "that we had him for three years, and that he was not going to slave as he had bin." He became idle, saucy and gluttonous, to a degree I should have before thought incredible; he was always eating, notwithstanding which it came to my knowledge that he had complained to a neighbor's servant that we—that is, Emma Maria and I—were "a rubbishing starving lot; and that he could hardly get enough to keep body and soul together;" and that he had likewise given to the world sundry other statements, which, though ingeniously and diabolically falsified, were yet sufficiently based upon circumstances of actual occurrence to convince me that he had acquired habits of persevering and judicious eaves-dropping. He speedily became the bane of my life; never did I leave the house in the morning, without some unpleasant reminder of his presence there; never did I return in the evening but to hear the voice of lamentation and complaint respecting his behavior. Unblacked were now the boots, unpolished the cutlery, unheeded the knocker and the bell; nay, one day he absolutely declined to wait upon Emma Maria at dinner (I dined at a shop-house near my place of business), and was so violent that, on my return at night, I found her in tears.

I could not believe that any sane person would behave as Skeggs had done without some cause, fancied or real, and I demanded particulars.

"He just said he would not."

"But, my dear," I asked, "did not you reason with him on such preposterous conduct?"

Yes, Emma Maria had reasoned with him.

"And what did he do then?"

"He da-da-danced at me!" with sobbing.

I admitted the difficulty of refuting this argument, and descended to the kitchen.—But I could do no good with him, and I found that the notion that "we had him" for so long a time, had taken entire possession of him.

So, on the morrow, I presented myself before the superintendent of the asylum, and laid before him my complaint. I found him a different man from what he had been at our last interview—could, not say ungrateful.

"It was very strange," Wilkins had always shown himself a remarkably good boy if I doubted this, I could see his character duly certified in the books of the institution."

I declined this solace, not seeing its exact bearing on my case, and being already aware from experience that Skeggs was a finished hypocrite. Shall I confess that I only kept my temper with difficulty, seeing as I did in the superintendent's manner an evident expression of opinion that I had no business to have a boy from the institution behaving badly in my house?

All that I could get by way of proposed remedy was a suggestion that one of the ladies' committee should call at my house, talk to Wilkins, and give him good advice to keep from future evil. I had not the liveliest faith in this moral prophylactic, but, in an evil hour, I consented to its administration. How much the remedy transcended the disease, it is beyond my power to tell.

The committee lady came and talked to our page, and talked and came, and talked again. She was never out of the house; she was there sometimes as early as nine A. M., and on one occasion she left the door, and a quarter before eleven P. M. Whatever Bernard was doing, she came and demanded him to be talked to. She routed Emma Maria, who hinted to her that her presence was occasionally inconvenient; and when I ventured to second the hint, she wouldn't take it. She possessed us, and I used to go about my daily affairs thinking of how she was even then elated with Wilkins in our dining room, and composing imaginary forms of address to her, of which the beginning used to hover between—"Madam, I most really request that you will be good enough," and "Fie, in the name of lady, aren't!" I don't think I should ever have had the nerve to turn her out, had that course not been forced upon me.

It may be well supposed how this occurrence acted upon Skeggs. He, of course, learnt the result of the interview between the superintendent and myself—(I'll swear I saw the committed lady lurking in the street one morning)—and shaped his course accordingly. But deliverance was at hand. One evening I was returning home, and a one fortunate wind having blown a brick down our bed-room chimney the night before, I thought me that I would go up to the back street, and look whether any outward damage was discernible. It was just dusk, and hastened up the street, doubting whether the fading light would serve my purpose, when I suddenly became aware of an old and very ill-favored woman at our yard-door, in earnest conversation with some one within.—Before I could reach the spot a bundle was transferred to her, and she straightway departed. I went round to the front, was admitted by Emma Maria, who was at the window looking out for me, and called Mary, the maid-servant. Mary was out. "At last, Skeggs," thought I, "I have thee," and I regret to say that I felt something like triumph at the idea.

I summoned him up stairs, and imperiously demanded what woman he had just been talking to? Of course the first impulse of the ingenious boy was bold, barefaced falsehood.

"He hadn't been talking to any woman."

I convinced him gently that this line was useless; and then, "Oh, yes; there was a woman!" as though it had quite escaped his memory. "Well, it was—yes, it was his aunt."

"Oh! and what had he given her?"

"Nothing."

It required the threat of a policeman before Skeggs admitted, as he ultimately did, that a few articles of household linen had been considerably bestowed by him upon this relative.

I may as well state here what we afterwards found out—that "a few" very inadequately described the number and variety of articles which had disappeared, evidently during some time.

Next day I had the pleasure of visiting the school, and informed my friend the superintendent that if he didn't at once ease me of Skeggs, I would be under the necessity of bringing the matter before a magistrate, who would not only deal with the said Skeggs, but would enquire the indenture which had bound him to me. I was sorry after all, for the superintendent—he seemed so cast down and really grieved at the affair; but I was firm; and to prevent the scandal and consequent detriment to the institution he consented to quash the indenture. He much wished me to try another boy, but to this proposal I hastily replied, "Heaven forbid!" and left the place, which I have never since entered.

Our next venture was not a bad boy like Skeggs, but he had his faults. He, too, was gluttonous; this, however, I find to be a peculiarity of the genus page; but it was unpleasant that this youth by gross feeding used to bring out boils upon his face to such an extent that he was often unable to wait at table. Not that this was an unmitigated subject of vexation, especially when we had friends at our social board; for Edward used occasionally to take an obtrusive interest in the conversation, and alarm people by breaking out into hoarse chuckles, much behind time, at passing jokes; and over Emma Maria and myself with confusion, either by losing himself in the contemplation of current events, or by dropping the plates and dishes. The fact is, he was only one remove from an idiot. Skeggs' suit of clothes was altered for him, and it appeared that he must have had some undeveloped views on the bullion question as connected with the shiny buttons thereof; for having removed three of them from the most prominent part of his chest, with a view, I suppose, to some experiments on their nature and properties, he appeared at dinner one Sunday with two common brass tin trusser buttons done pin die neatly visible in lieu of them. Notwithstanding this, there was as much placidity and self-complacency in his face as though his appearance presented no grounds for evil or complaint; and his manner altogether was that of one conscious of being in all respects a perfectly appointed page. This was trying; but it was worse to see him, when mildly questioned as to the cause of this absence of buttons, suddenly pass from absurd equanimity to idiotic despair, giving vent to the most frightful howl imaginable, and protesting that he "thought they were silver," as if that was a good and sufficient excuse. He hadn't sense to perceive that it was an aggravation of the offence. Well, I looked over this, had him re-buttoned, and retained him in my service. What was the consequence? One morning, in accordance with a previous arrangement with my tailor, I told Edward that a person would call for some new clothes—sent home to me in an unsatisfactory state—which he was to deliver on such application. When I returned home, I found that the clothes were indeed gone, but whether, no one knew. It appeared that during the forenoon Edward, on opening the door, found there a man, and, idiotically jumping to a conclusion, at once said, "Oh, you're from the tailor, I suppose, for these clothes of master?" to which the stranger—evidently a man capable of improving opportunity—promptly replied in the affirmative, and at once bore off the habiliments, as also an overcoat vol-

untarily added by our page. When the tailor's boy—the real Simon Pure—arrived, Edward broke wildly in upon Emma Maria with a voluntary confession, the substance of which I have related. The top coat he said he thought wanted mending, and it might as well go. The little freak cost me twelve pounds odd, and the services of Edward.

I have left myself no space to describe in detail the misdeeds of subsequent pages, and can only name three briefly: James, who in conjunction with Emma Maria's brother, aged fourteen, in the course of some experimental philosophy involving the use of gunpowder, set himself on fire; and had it not been for the presence of mind and body of Mary the servant, a female of great dimensions and weight, who at once knocked him down and sat upon him, he would have set the kitchen on fire also. As it was, he