

Isabella Mayson Beeton, *Book of Household Management*, 1861

*Isabella Mayson Beeton (1836–1865) was a British woman who authored several pieces about how to run an organized, effective household. She and her husband, a publisher, collected these into the *Book of Household Management*. This quickly became a Victorian bestseller, with almost two million copies sold in the seven years after its publication. Beeton strongly believed in the nineteenth-century, middle-class ideal of the separation of spheres by gender. This ideal held that a woman's place was in the private sphere of home and church and that a man's place was out in the public world of work and politics. Beeton died as a result of childbirth complications in 1865 at the age of twenty-eight.*

*Source: Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 84–85.*

As with the Commander of an Army, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path. Of all those acquirements, which more particularly belong to the feminine character, there are none which take a higher rank, in our estimation, than such as enter into a knowledge of household duties; for on these are perpetually dependent the happiness, comfort, and well-being of a family. . . .

Having risen early, . . . and having given due attention to the bath, and made a careful toilet, it will be well at once to see that the children have received their proper ablutions, and are in every way clean and comfortable. . . .

After breakfast is over, it will be well for the mistress to make a round of the kitchen and other offices, to see that all are in order, and that the morning's work has been properly performed by the various domestics. The orders for the day should then be given, and any questions which the domestics desire to ask, respecting their several departments, should be answered, and any special articles they may require, handed to them from the store-closet. In those establishments where there is a housekeeper, it will not be so necessary for the mistress, personally, to perform the above-named duties.

After this general superintendence of her servants, the mistress, if a mother of a young family, may devote herself to the instruction of some of its younger members, or to the examination of the state of their wardrobe, leaving the later portion of the morning for reading, or for some amusing recreation. . . . Unless the means of the mistress be very circumscribed, and she be obliged to devote a great deal of her time to the making of her children's clothes, and other economical pursuits, it is right that she should give some time to the pleasure of literature, the innocent delights of the garden, and to the improvement of any special abilities for music, painting, and other elegant arts, which she may, happily, possess. . . .

After luncheon, morning calls and visits may be made and received. . . . Visits of ceremony, or courtesy . . . are uniformly required after dining at a friend's house, or after a ball, picnic, or any other party. These visits should be short, a stay of from fifteen to twenty minutes being quite sufficient. A lady paying a visit may remove her boa or neckerchief; but neither her shawl nor bonnet. . . .

The morning calls being paid or received, and their etiquette properly attended to, the next great event of the day in most establishments is "The Dinner." . . .

The half-hour before dinner has always been considered as the great ordeal through which the mistress, in giving a dinner-party, will either pass with flying colors, or, lose many of her laurels. The anxiety to receive her guests, her hope that all will be present in due time, her trust in the skill of her cook, and the attention of the other domestics, all tend to make these few minutes a trying time. The mistress, however, must display no kind of agitation, but show her tact in suggesting light and cheerful subjects of conversation. . . .

When fruit has been taken, and a glass or two of wine passed round, the time will have arrived when the hostess will rise, and thus give the signal for the ladies to leave the gentlemen, and retire to the drawing-room. . . .

Of the manner of passing evenings at home, there is none pleasanter than in such recreative enjoyments as those which relax the mind from its severer duties, whilst they stimulate it with a gentle delight. Where there are young people forming a part of the evening circle, interesting and agreeable pastime should especially be promoted. . . . It ought . . . to enter into the domestic policy of every parent, to make her children feel that home is the happiest place in the world; that to imbue them with this delicious home-feeling is one of the choicest gifts a parent can bestow.

Light or fancy needlework often forms a portion of the evening's recreation for the ladies of the household, and this may be varied by an occasional game at chess or backgammon. It has often been remarked, too, that nothing is more delightful to the feminine members of a family, than the reading aloud of some good standard work or amusing publication. . . .

In retiring for the night, it is well to remember that early rising is almost impossible, if late going to bed be the order, or rather disorder, of the house. The younger members of a family should go early and at regular hours to their beds, and the domestics as soon as possible after a reasonably appointed hour. Either the master or the mistress of a house should, after all have gone to their separate rooms, see that all is right with respect to the lights and fires below; and no servants should, on any account, be allowed to remain up after the heads of the house have retired.

QUESTIONS

- 1. How would you argue that this is a progressive work for women?**
- 2. What are the difficulties associated with running a Victorian household?**
- 3. Who has the hardest job in the household and why?**