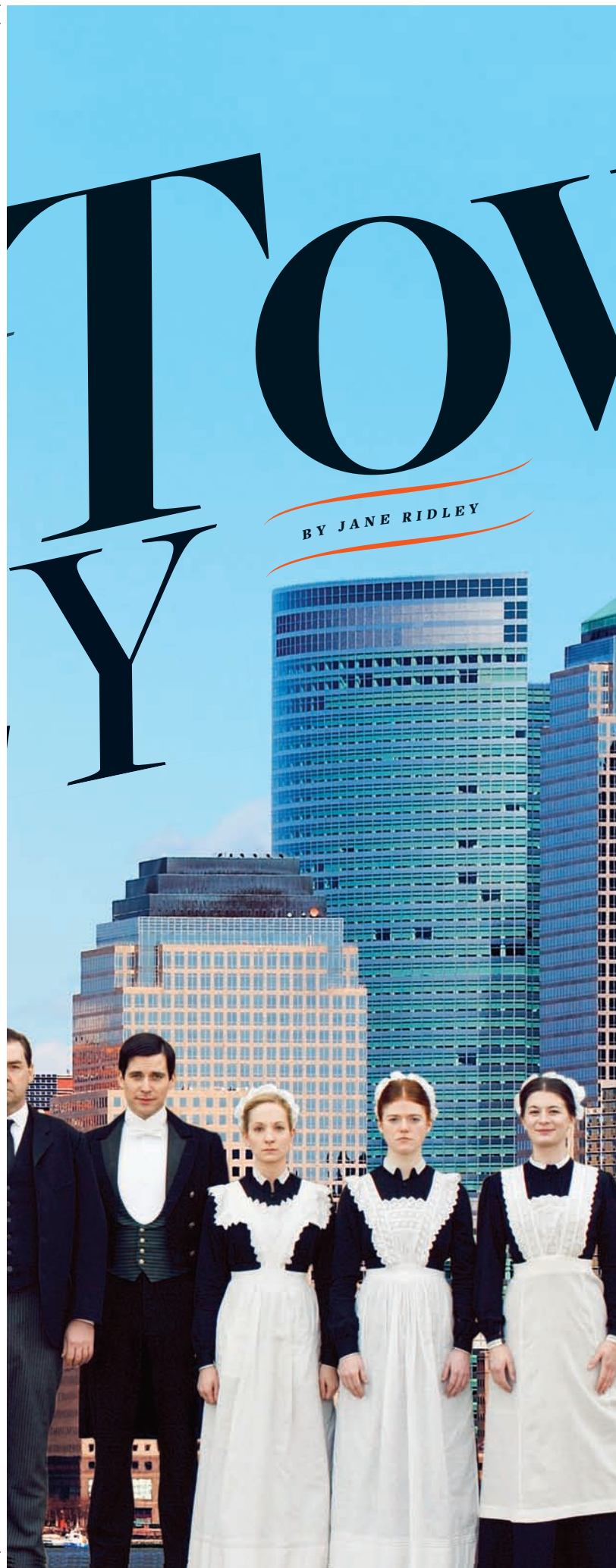


***N*EW YORK CITY'S MODERN-DAY DUKES AND DUCHESSES
BLUR THE LINES BETWEEN UPSTAIRS AND
DOWNSTAIRS, DEMANDING THEIR HOUSEHOLD
HELP PROVIDE EVERYTHING FROM DONATED
EGGS TO PROPERLY BEHAVED AQUATIC ANIMALS.**

**WELCOME TO
DOWNTOWN
ABBIE**



NYC's elite employ staff similar to the servants on PBS's cult hit *Downton Abbey*.



TOWN

BY JANE RIDLEY

WHEN the lady of the house asked Elizabeth*, her attractive Upper East Side nanny, to step into her office to discuss “a delicate matter,” she assumed it had something to do with the family’s 14-year-old son and his schoolboy crush.

Not so. The financier’s wife had another matter of the heart on her mind.

“You know how we’ve been trying for a baby, and we’ve been having some issues?” she asked the nanny, a 25-year-old English rose with a trim figure, blue eyes and a bachelor’s degree. “We wondered if you would mind donating your eggs.”

If advanced reproductive medicine had existed in the early 20th century, it’s the kind of request the “downstairs” personnel of TV’s *Downton Abbey* would have hopped to do. But nearly a century later in New York City, their modern-day equivalents are emboldened enough to say no.

Elizabeth politely declined the offer of a \$30,000 cash bonus on top of her \$100,000 annual salary if she went ahead with the egg-donor deal.

“I called on my British wit and made a joke about whether she wanted them ‘scrambled or fried,’” she says, recalling how her “principal”—the common term for bosses in the industry, and treated with the same level of deference that White House staff might reserve for FLOTUS—reacted with a “somewhat weak” smile.

“It’s freaky to think they wanted me to continue working for them and raise what would have been my own child.”

The master-servant relationship is no longer as clearly defined as it was circa 1912 in *Downton Abbey*, with aristocrats like the Earl and Countess of Grantham and servants such as Mr. Carson, their butler, and head housekeeper Mrs. Hughes, who all return for a third season January 6.

But one thing’s for sure—the same devotion is expected.

“They often act as if they own you,” says the nanny, now 31, who works for a new family in Bedford, NY. “But that mother took things to a whole new level.”

The employee still left on good terms a few months later. To the best of her knowledge, the mother has not had more children. Elizabeth lists her as a professional reference and, until now, has only mentioned the proposition to close family.



Like all employees working at her level, Elizabeth signed a nondisclosure agreement, and is at pains to protect the identity of her past and present employers.

Such discretion is a quality that the “baddies” of *Downton*, such as Lady Crowley’s devious maid, O’Brien, and her cohort, Thomas, the valet, woefully lack. But confidentiality and trust are ingrained in real-life, 21st-century professionals such as Paul Pearson, a butler and estate manager in high demand among New York’s elite.

The former Buckingham Palace footman, who later served as a butler and house manager to the late Brooke Astor, now works on the UES for a politician and his philanthropist wife. His salary is in the six-figure range, plus overtime.

Pearson discloses little about his employers, except to say they are “respectful and appreciative,” and that their strict observance of his 40-hour week is “unheard of” in this line of work. Most of his peers work at least 60 hours per week, and “pretty much forfeit” their personal lives for the job.

“It’s honestly not very glamorous or exciting,” insists the 50-something butler, who maintains that working for the fabulously wealthy can be “boring.”

“These days, it’s less about serving fancy food from a silver platter and more about booking flights over the Internet or comparing bids from catering and construction firms.”

But the job has its hairy moments. Pearson says he’ll never forget the night he drove, “hell for leather,” through the Maine countryside with an octogenarian Lady Astor in the back seat of her vintage Mercedes. One of her hands was bleeding, and wrapped in a towel.

“I had the top of her finger in a Ziploc bag,” he recalls. “We were dashing to the hospital because her two dogs had been scrapping, and when she intervened and grabbed one of their tails, it bit her finger right off!”

Unfortunately, the missing section of Astor’s index finger could not be reattached. “They could probably have done it if we’d been in New York City,” laments Pearson. “But this was rural Maine.”



MODERN DOMESTIC MUST-HAVE:

ESTATE MANAGER

Estate manager-butlers like Paul Pearson (above) top the service pyramid because they deal directly with the principal while also managing other help, such as florists and gardeners. Salaries range from \$85,000 to \$250,000, with five years' experience. "They are the gatekeepers," says Robert Wynne Parry, CEO of Society Staffing.



Pearson’s transition from “old money” butler to “new money” estate manager is a common trajectory for people in service nowadays.

Back in the day at Downton Abbey, and at mansions on the Hudson and in Newport, R.I., during the Gilded Age, job descriptions were firmly maintained. You were a nanny, a maid, a cook or a groundskeeper. Simple as that. These days, the roles often blur.

Principals might advertise for a driver, house manager or estate manager, but in this more demanding, economically volatile era, what they really want is a personal—and versatile—assistant-housekeeper hybrid.

If you’re as comfortable organizing charity functions and Webinars as you are ferrying kids to after-school activities and placing orders with Fresh Direct, it could be the perfect position.

At least on paper. Take Jennifer*, 42, a Queens resident who worked five years ago as a house manager in a six-story brownstone off Park Avenue.

Her typical day involved scheduling hair and beauty appointments for the principal, liaising with maintenance

teams at the family’s summer and winter homes, contracting yachtmen and pilots, paying the dog walker and helping coordinate the odd fund-raiser.

She often picked up the kids from class and made them dinner.

“You really have to be a jack-of-all-trades,” says Jennifer, who earned about \$85,000 and worked an average of 60 to 70 hours per week. “It was good money, and I enjoyed getting suited and booted to go to that upscale address.”

Less enjoyable, however, was dealing with the outrageous demands, which ranged from sourcing a 40-inch flourless chocolate cake within an hour of a dinner party to training a 2-year-old not to pick his nose at his interview for a preschool slot.

“The daughter was once given a huge aquarium, and some specialists came to install it,” recalls Jennifer. “But the fish were hiding in their new environment, and the little girl was upset because she couldn’t see them.

“I was instructed to call the pet service and demand they come back and get the fish out from behind the rocks.

“My job was to keep a straight face and not look shocked.”

Jennifer, currently employed by a “lovely, laid-back” family on the Upper West Side—“I think there is a definite difference between East and West,” she observes—eventually quit her previous gig after the principal accused a maid of stealing a cashmere sweater.

“She called her a ‘mongrel’ and a ‘wetback,’ and I realized I couldn’t take it anymore,” says Jennifer. “I’m African-American, so goodness knows what she was saying behind my back.”

Nobody should have to put up with racist behavior, but the subservient nature of the job goes with the territory.

And therein lies a problem, suggests Teresa Leigh, whose company, Teresa Leigh Household Risk Management, has an office on Madison Avenue.

“Americans, as a culture, have difficulty serving—we just do,” says the estate manager turned domestic staffing advisor. “The population of workers who are able to serve in a private household in a professional manner and basically devote their lives to their

employer is dwindling every year.”

The Domestic Estate Managers’ Association was set up in 2007 in an effort to unify private service staff via a networking forum. It currently has 1,500 members—mostly house and estate managers, with about 175 based in New York City.

But co-founder Matthew Haack says it’s impossible to know the exact number of household staff operating in the US, since many are paid off the books.

“To get a true number, think about all of the professional sports athletes, celebrities and billionaires across the country,” he says. “Someone is handling and managing their estates.”

Mature, “more traditionally minded” servants such as European butlers and English-trained nannies are considered the *crème de la crème* of the industry.

The reason? They recognize the boundaries between the principal and the help more readily, says Leigh.

Despite the great recession, demand has never been higher.

“The very wealthy exist above the economic situation and will always need staff,” explains the advisor, whose 110 clients nationwide, including 32 in the tri-state area alone, have “at least \$50 to \$100 million liquid.”

“When you are moving at the speed of light, traveling the world, going between seven houses and raising a lot of children, you’re not going to be the one running to the dry cleaner.”

The trouble is that a lot of “new money” types blanche at the idea of paying an experienced house manager or personal assistant the average wage of \$90,000 to \$125,000, plus 401(k) and health benefits—the equivalent salary package of a corporate personal assistant or manager of an exclusive boutique hotel.

Instead, sources say, they try to hire help on the cheap. Bypassing domestic staffing agencies that charge between 15 and 20 percent of the employee’s annual salary as commission, the nouveau riche recruit from (God forbid!) Craigslist, and frequently pay off the books.

“It often backfires,” warns Margaret*, an experienced Manhattan-based house manager. “When something goes

wrong, it comes back to haunt them.”

Cameron Johnson, a 30-year-old nanny with 10 years’ experience in New York, agrees that you get what you pay for. She won’t name the celebrity concerned, but says she recently interviewed for a position taking care of a starlet’s 1-year-old in Tribeca.

“She was like, ‘We need someone five days a week, 24/7,’” says Johnson. “They even wanted me to sleep in the same room as the baby.”

“I thought, ‘That’s not going to happen’—I don’t think it’s even legal. But I liked the family, and said I would maybe consider working Monday morning through Thursday morning if they paid me enough.”

Johnson requested a salary of \$175,000. But the celebrity stood firm on the five-day, around-the-clock work week, and said \$60,000 was her max.

No dice. The nanny transferred to the West Coast, where she easily landed the six-figure “going rate” as the personal assistant and nanny for a stay-at-home mom and fashion blogger.

Margaret, meanwhile, is nursing her wounds after being fired recently from what she’d hoped would be her “dream job” as the personal assistant/



MODERN DOMESTIC MUST-HAVE: NANNY

Nannies like 30-year-old Cameron Johnson (below) are not only the hand that rocks the cradle, they often double as personal assistant-household manager hybrids, managing other staff and organizing the schedules of the principals and their wee ones. Salaries range from \$60,000 to \$125,000.



house manager for an Upper East Side socialite and philanthropist.

“I was dealing with the staff, the wife’s calendar and the children’s calendar,” she says. “It was a very intense, full-time position.”

Unfortunately, she was abruptly let go because the family said it had to trim costs, which was particularly galling since the principal is worth “hundreds of millions of dollars.”

“There is this insane mentality among the wealthy that they need to cut back, when it’s a myth that the mega-rich have lost money,” adds Margaret, who has worked as a house and estate manager for 25 years. “They don’t have to worry about bills, but the staff who work for them do.”

“We are fighting a losing battle because our cost of living is going up, but the wages are going down.”

But not all domestic staff are unhappy with their lot.

Estate manager Ty O’Hare has only fond memories of his work on the Upper East Side as a private chauffeur for a hedge fund chief in the early 2000s.

“When you are driving the principal around, you are privy to every aspect of their life—their business dealings, their personal relationships, the whole deal,” he says.

O’Hare laughs as he recalls one secret he shared with his boss’s wife.

He was driving her downtown to meet her husband at the theater when, to her horror, she realized she’d lost her multimillion-dollar diamond ring.

“We pulled over and spent 30 minutes searching the car,” recalls O’Hare, 41. “I literally had to take out the entire back seat to look for it.”

Her husband repeatedly phoned to say the curtain was going up, and to ask why they were running so late.

Then, on the verge of hysteria, the wife reached down and found the ring in the cuff of her Valentino dress trousers.

“We never discussed the matter again,” says O’Hare, with a benign smile.

*Some names and personal details have been changed to protect the identity of certain employees and employers.

MELISSA BARNES