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THE BUSINESS OF LIFE

Being a personal assistant can seem like a meaningless task, but for Laura Stevens it was a glimpse at the big picture.



Madame was an Oscar-winning actress. She had starred in some of America's most beloved films. And I would soon know her personally. Privately. Under the roof of her Parisian home, she would teach me lessons no book ever could. I was to become her Personal Assistant.

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It's not a job listing you could ever find on Monster.com, that's for sure. So how did I find myself the secretary to an octogenarian Academy Award-winner, 4,000 miles from home?

Like many ex-patriot work situations, the opportunity presented itself through word of mouth. I had just resigned from my post with a French financial group, and my roommate Sarah, a fellow American abroad who held the job herself for a year, announced her decision to return to the U.S. She asked if I would care to replace her as Madame's assistant. Already captivated by Madame through Sarah's outrageous tales, I didn't have to think twice before responding. *Oui!* Sign me up! The timing was perfect.

On my first day, I arrived at Madame's four-story *hôtel particulier*, nestled on a quiet street in Paris' chic 16th arrondissement. Sarah met me at the door, led me through the marble-floor entryway and up the red-carpeted staircase to Madame's boudoir. And there she was, her white hair swept back, pearl necklace and Ferragamos. Madame clasped my hands in hers and greeted me with perhaps the warmest smile I had ever known. "So good to see you, Laura."

Being her personal assistant would mean more than tending to administrative needs. It would involve understanding the nuances of her character, training myself to predict her thoughts and building a relationship with her that stretched beyond the office (which was, in fact, a converted master bedroom in her house).

I knew that no two personal assistant jobs were the same, but this one proved particularly exceptional. Madame—as all members of her staff referred to her—drank a *demi-bouteille* of champagne every evening at 6 p.m. She had the walls of her library repainted five times until she was satisfied with just the right shade of blue. She spoke of her "favorite century"—the 18th—with a fondness most apply to a favorite TV show or music group. And our days were often peppered with first-hand stories of escapades with Bette Davis or Jimmy Stewart.

As in every personal assistant position, the individual tasks required were varied and often difficult, with no written formula or precedent for many of them. I grew to love Madame's challenges, for in addition to typing she often presented me with projects that were so obscure I came to cherish them as valuable exercises. She encouraged and reinforced my

belief that, with patience and perseverance, every problem has a solution.

My first official assignment was to photocopy Madame's genealogy documents—an oversized assemblage of fragile, yellowed pages secured in a linen binding. Because of the book's large dimensions, locating an establishment with a scanner or photocopier of adequate size proved nearly impossible. I phoned over 15 copy shops in every district of Paris and was told repeatedly that the machine required for the job simply did not exist.

"We will find a way; we just have to!" Madame persisted. She was always careful to include herself in the mission, but I knew better: there was no *we* about it; *I* would find a way.

And when I eventually did pull it off, we were both elated. From that point forward Madame affectionately referred to me as her Velvet Tiger, "Tenacious you are, yet as gentle as a little lamb."

Still, my primary duty was typing Madame's correspondence. As a golden-era film favorite, the actress still received bags of fan mail, and spent her days carefully replying to each »

letter. She would dictate while I typed on her antiquated word processor.

The machine itself spoke volumes about Madame's philosophy on life: Efficiency is not the priority; it is the quality of the end

result. That has stuck with me. "If I don't carry out each task to the best of my ability, then what's the point?" she once said. And she was a perfectionist, which meant detailed—sometimes tedious—work for me.

On one occasion, Madame was invited to read several verses from the book of Habbakuk at The American Cathedral on Easter Sunday. Draped in her divan, she studied the passage for several days, repeatedly reciting the text as if preparing a delivery to the United Nations.

"I do not have a firm grasp on the scripture's meaning," she said to me. In hopes that varying phraseologies would provide clarification, she asked me to procure four different Biblical translations. When this tactic did not prove helpful, Madame requested that I arrange a consultation with her pastor, who could, hopefully, provide some insight. "How can I communicate these words to the congregation if I don't understand their context?" she sighed.

"She was always careful to include herself in the mission, but I knew better: there was no *we* about it; I would find a way."

And she loved words, which gave me a newfound appreciation for correspondence. She was a master of the English language. Her verbiage and eloquence were of another era, her grammar impeccable. She labored over each letter she crafted, editing and

re-editing for hours, sometimes days. As I diligently typed and re-typed the countless drafts, I learned the lost art of letter writing.

Madame saw beauty and value in every object—and in every person. Through her example I began to do the same. When a friend sent her a teddy bear at Christmas, I saw a cheap, Hall-mark-variety stuffed animal. In her eyes, it was a cherished keepsake.

"I am beguiled by this delightful little creature," she dictated to me, examining the bear's features through bifocals. "With its fur-trimmed bonnet and cloak, its red velvet skirt, its lace-trimmed pantelettes, and its ermine muff bedecked with a sprig of holly. How kind you are to have sent it to me and with what a delightful companion you have provided me."

She was a woman of her word in all matters, giving new meaning to sincerity. Once, after nearly a year had passed since the arrival of a fruitcake gift, Madame finally put pen to paper,

apologizing for her long-overdue thank-you letter. But she could not, in good conscience, thank the sender for his delicious confection until she had actually partaken of it. So, sample it we did, both of us secretly relieved that the now 10-month-old cake was still, remarkably, quite good.

I quietly found myself reflecting back on the many thank-you notes I had written in my own personal life, often sent with a spirit of obligation. Through her example, Madame taught me graciousness.

After 14 months with Madame, these qualities were part of my own. Knowing and working with her had enriched my life, my being. But the 4,000 mile separation from my family and friends was taking its toll. I felt it was time to leave her, leave Paris and return to the U.S.

On my last day, at 6 p.m., Madame invited me into her boudoir. She handed me a crystal flute, and we shared a *demi-bouteille* of champagne. As we toasted, I reflected back on my tenure with her. Working as Madame's personal assistant proved challenging, rewarding and often humorous. Over the course of that year, I heard personal accounts of life during Hollywood's Golden Age, of behind-the-set romances, rifts and other insider gossip. But those stories, fascinating as they were, paled in comparison to Madame herself, who was simply mesmerizing. ○