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Welcome to the Kingdom of Nannies!

Today's Mary Poppins no longer wears a uniform and addresses parents by their first names, but she still reigns over the upbringing of the offspring of the British upper-middle classes and is even sought after abroad. A report on an institution still going strong, by Sophie Roquelle.

At ten months, Stanley is already a photo-pro. He roles his bright little eyes towards the lens and smiles sweetly. It really is true to say that he is a 'baby-in-training', as every day his nanny Sarah sends photos of his different activities to his mother, father and grandmother – and there are plenty of activities! With music lessons, baby-gym, learning sessions at the library and soon, swimming lessons, Stanley's mornings are pretty full. Afternoons, on the other hand, are more relaxed – long walks in the park and discovery learning activities with Sarah. It has now been three months since the twenty-seven year old took charge of Stanley, for twelve hours a day in his charming Maida Vale home, a residential area of London popular with the young upper-middle classes. Katie and Nick, Sarah's employers, are two individuals consumed by their careers, but lie far from the great fortunes of the City that one might expect from a couple who employ a full time nanny for their son. Instead, faced with the necessity of finding a way to look after their only son, they have recruited a qualified nanny and bought an apartment in a neighbouring road for her lodgings.

Sitting on the carpet in black leggings and a denim shirt ("A good nanny is always on the ground" – a saying which goes with the job), Sarah seems more like a reassuring older sister or a young mother who's already got the hang of things. It is her fourth post, and for a young woman; "who wanted to travel and meet interesting people", the decision to work as a nanny was an obvious one. Following two years of studies after finishing school in order to obtain the precious qualifications and Sarah was off to the other side of the world, to Australia for three years, and the next summer, it was Provence, where Katie and Nick had rented a house.

And Mary Poppins has really changed! The uniform disappeared years ago, the huge prams have been replaced with light buggies and the relationships with the parents are, they say, relaxed. Yet the institution itself hasn't aged a day, better yet, it was totally relaunched in the 90s following the successful British reality television series *Supernanny*, later adapted for French screens. "Here having a nanny is both more common and more acceptable than in France", explains **Annie Martin**, a Frenchwoman who has lived in London for 25 years, where she founded **Nannies Incorporated**, the agency which recruited Sarah.

In a country where the crèches remain underdeveloped and the concept of the nursery school barely exists, many children spend their first four or five years in their homes. The nanny – not to be confused with an au-pair or babysitter – is certainly a luxury reserved for the comfortably off, a good nanny costs an average of £500 per week (570 euro) and doesn't touch the housework. Above all, it is a proper job – some 6000 professionals are trained each year in specialist schools. Often, like Sarah, they are young middle class girls who want to see the world and the city before they get married or form their own families; "The English nanny is an integral part of the household", adds **Mrs Martin**. Generally, she remains in contact with the family long after leaving the home. And when she marries,



tradition dictates that she asks the children that she has helped to raise to be her pageboys and bridesmaids.

Today there are 110,000 nannies employed in Great Britain and a string of specialised agencies share the market, checking the references with a fine toothcomb and ensuring the quality of the family's living arrangements. There are two channels; maternity nurses, who setup in the home following the mother's return from the maternity ward to look after the baby for the first few months, and nannies, who take charge of the children until the year they go to school, and sometimes even beyond that. Some women look for a nanny when they are barely pregnant; "We're often the second to know about the pregnancy after the husband!" says **Mrs. Martin**, smiling.

Following the birth of her daughter in 2009, Mélanie was quick to find a real treasure; "I wanted her to be English not only for the language and manners, but also so that I would know that she could cope if something went wrong, lots of foreign nannies don't even know the number of the emergency services", explains the young mother who works in the film industry.

The beginning of the 2000's was the boom period for nannies. Money was flowing in the City and the bankers and traders no longer knew how to spend their bonuses. Along with the Porsche, the big house in Chelsea, the made-to-measure Berluti shoes and the holidays in the Maldives, the nanny became another symbol of affluence. The competition for the best is fierce; salaries rocket (up to £800, even £1000 per week) and the benefits grow too; a car for work duties, summer holidays, lodging (a real plus in London, where the square meter is the most expensive in the world)...The Russian oligarchs and the large Arab families are prepared to pay a high price so that their offspring are raised by a 'British nanny'. One even earns an annual salary of £80,000 (90,000 euro) for looking after the children of a Russian millionaire in Moscow!

The British nanny really is an excellent export! Today, more than 5000 are employed in foreign households; but what is it that the parents are looking for above all else? First and foremost, it is to raise their children in the language of Shakespeare. The wish for bilingual children is one which springs from all well-off homes, including those in Paris; "Often clients ask us for nannies who don't speak French", they confide at **Nannies Incorporated**, whose **Paris office** provides nannies for the families of the *CAC40*; "Beth only speaks in English to the children", boasts a Parisian director whose two children are "managed" by a nanny.

The parents also imagine that an English nanny will know how to manage discipline in the home and will show some authority in the eyes of the children, an image reinforced by American reality television series like *Nanny 911*, which showed unbearably naughty little ones led back onto the right path by an English nanny. It is the cliché of taking the hard line, even if the reality is less clear-cut; "We do what parents ask us to, even if we don't always agree with it", summarises Sarah Norris.

However the financial crisis followed by a recession, has caused the nanny business to suffer. In September 2008, when the City plunged into the abyss, the nannies were the first to be laid-off. The message since then on British blogs such as '*austerity mums*', the message is clear; "its the end of the nannies and their diva-ish demands!" reads one comment amongst them.



Its also a job slowly opening up to men. Women raising their children alone sometimes turn to 'mannies' – yes, that's what they're called! - especially if they have young sons at home, confirm several of the agency directors. Even if in the traditional upper-middle classes, are hesitant to take the leap, it is certainly the trend amongst celebrities; from Gwyneth Paltrow, to Madonna, even Elle MacPherson, all prefer to leave their little ones in the care of a man.

Sophie Roquelle

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