

## CHAPTER IV—AN EDITOR

A devout lady, to whom some friend had presented one of my books, used to say when asked how she was getting on with it, 'Sal, it's dreary, weary, uphill work, but I've wrestled through with tougher jobs in my time, and, please God, I'll wrestle through with this one.' It was in this spirit, I fear, though she never told me so, that my mother wrestled for the next year or more with my leaders, and indeed I was always genuinely sorry for the people I saw reading them. In my spare hours I was trying journalism of another kind and sending it to London, but nearly eighteen months elapsed before there came to me, as unlooked for as a telegram, the thought that there was something quaint about my native place. A boy who found that a knife had been put into his pocket in the night could not have been more surprised. A few days afterwards I sent my mother a London evening paper with an article entitled 'An Auld Licht Community,' and they told me that when she saw the heading she laughed, because there was something droll to her in the sight of the words Auld Licht in print. For her, as for me, that newspaper was soon to have the face of a friend. To this day I never pass its placards in the street without shaking it by the hand, and she used to sew its pages together as lovingly as though they were a child's frock; but let the truth be told, when she read that first article she became alarmed, and fearing the talk of the town, hid the paper from all eyes. For some time afterwards, while I proudly pictured her showing this and similar articles to all who felt an interest in me, she was really concealing them fearfully in a bandbox on the garret stair. And she wanted to know by return of post whether I was paid for these articles as much as I was paid for real articles; when she heard that I was paid better, she laughed again and had them out of the bandbox for re-reading, and it cannot be denied that she thought the London editor a fine fellow but slightly soft.

When I sent off that first sketch I thought I had exhausted the subject, but our editor wrote that he would like something more of the same, so I sent him a marriage, and he took it, and then I tried him with a funeral, and he took it, and really it began to look as if we had him. Now my mother might have been discovered, in answer to certain excited letters, flinging the bundle of undarned socks from her lap, and 'going in for literature'; she was racking her brains, by request, for memories I might convert into articles, and they came to me in letters which she dictated to

my sisters. How well I could hear her sayings between the lines: 'But the editor-man will never stand that, it's perfect blethers'—'By this post it must go, I tell you; we must take the editor when he's hungry—we canna be blamed for it, can we? he prints them of his free will, so the wite is his'—'But I'm near terrified.—If London folk reads them we're done for.' And I was sounded as to the advisability of sending him a present of a lippie of shortbread, which was to be her crafty way of getting round him. By this time, though my mother and I were hundreds of miles apart, you may picture us waving our hands to each other across country, and shouting 'Hurrah!' You may also picture the editor in his office thinking he was behaving like a shrewd man of business, and unconscious that up in the north there was an elderly lady chuckling so much at him that she could scarcely scrape the potatoes.

I was now able to see my mother again, and the park seats no longer loomed so prominent in our map of London. Still, there they were, and it was with an effort that she summoned up courage to let me go. She feared changes, and who could tell that the editor would continue to be kind? Perhaps when he saw me—

She seemed to be very much afraid of his seeing me, and this, I would point out, was a reflection on my appearance or my manner.

No, what she meant was that I looked so young, and—and that would take him aback, for had I not written as an aged man?

'But he knows my age, mother.'

'I'm glad of that, but maybe he wouldna like you when he saw you.'

'Oh, it is my manner, then!'

'I dinna say that, but—'

Here my sister would break in: 'The short and the long of it is just this, she thinks nobody has such manners as herself. Can you deny it, you vain woman?' My mother would deny it vigorously.

'You stand there,' my sister would say with affected scorn, 'and tell me you don't think you could get the better of that man quicker than any of us?'

'Sal, I'm thinking I could manage him,' says my mother, with a chuckle.

'How would you set about it?'

Then my mother would begin to laugh. 'I would find out first if he had a family, and then I would say they were the finest family in London.'

'Yes, that is just what you would do, you cunning woman! But if he has no family?'

'I would say what great men editors are!'

'He would see through you.'

'Not he!'

'You don't understand that what imposes on common folk would never hoodwink an editor.'

'That's where you are wrong. Gentle or simple, stupid or clever, the men are all alike in the hands of a woman that flatters them.'

'Ah, I'm sure there are better ways of getting round an editor than that.'

'I daresay there are,' my mother would say with conviction, 'but if you try that plan you will never need to try another.'

'How artful you are, mother—you with your soft face! Do you not think shame?'

'Pooh!' says my mother brazenly.

'I can see the reason why you are so popular with men.'

'Ay, you can see it, but they never will.'

'Well, how would you dress yourself if you were going to that editor's office?'

'Of course I would wear my silk and my Sabbath bonnet.'

'It is you who are shortsighted now, mother. I tell you, you would manage him better if you just put on your old grey shawl and one of your bonny white mutches, and went in half smiling and half timid and said, "I am the mother of him that writes about the Auld Lichts, and I want you to promise that he will never have to sleep in the open air."'

But my mother would shake her head at this, and reply almost hotly, 'I tell you if I ever go into that man's office, I go in silk.'

I wrote and asked the editor if I should come to London, and he said No, so I went, laden with charges from my mother to walk in the middle of the street (they jump out on you as you are turning a corner), never to venture forth after sunset, and always to lock up everything (I who could never lock up anything, except my heart in company). Thanks to this editor, for the others would have nothing to say to me though I battered on all their doors, she was soon able to sleep at nights without the dread that I should be waking presently with the iron-work of certain seats figured on my person, and what relieved her very much was that I had begun to write as if Auld Lichts were not the only people I knew of. So long as I confined myself to them she had a haunting fear that, even though the editor remained blind to his best interests, something would one day go crack within me (as the mainspring of a watch breaks) and my pen refuse to write for evermore. 'Ay, I like the article brawly,' she would say timidly, 'but I'm doubting it's the last—I always have a sort of terror the new one may be the last,' and if many days elapsed before the arrival of another article her face would say mournfully, 'The blow has fallen—he can think of nothing more to write about.' If I ever shared her fears I never told her so, and the articles that were not Scotch grew in number until there were hundreds of them, all carefully preserved by her: they were the only thing in the house that, having served one purpose, she did not convert into something else, yet they could give her uneasy moments. This was because I nearly always assumed a character when I wrote; I must be a country squire, or an undergraduate, or a butler, or a member of the House of Lords, or a dowager, or a lady called Sweet Seventeen, or an engineer in India, else was my pen clogged, and though this gave my mother certain fearful joys, causing her to laugh unexpectedly (so far as my articles were concerned she nearly always laughed in the wrong place), it also scared her. Much to her amusement the editor continued to prefer the Auld Licht papers, however, as was proved (to those who knew him) by his way of thinking that the others would pass as they were, while he sent these back and asked me to make them better. Here again she came to my aid. I had said that the row of stockings were hung on a string by the fire, which was a recollection of my own, but she could tell me whether they were hung upside down. She became quite skilful at sending or giving me (for now I could be with her half the year) the right details, but still she

smiled at the editor, and in her gay moods she would say, 'I was fifteen when I got my first pair of elastic-sided boots. Tell him my charge for this important news is two pounds ten.'

'Ay, but though we're doing well, it's no' the same as if they were a book with your name on it.' So the ambitious woman would say with a sigh, and I did my best to turn the Auld Licht sketches into a book with my name on it. Then perhaps we understood most fully how good a friend our editor had been, for just as I had been able to find no well-known magazine—and I think I tried all—which would print any article or story about the poor of my native land, so now the publishers, Scotch and English, refused to accept the book as a gift. I was willing to present it to them, but they would have it in no guise; there seemed to be a blight on everything that was Scotch. I daresay we sighed, but never were collaborators more prepared for rejection, and though my mother might look wistfully at the scorned manuscript at times and murmur, 'You poor cold little crittur shut away in a drawer, are you dead or just sleeping?' she had still her editor to say grace over. And at last publishers, sufficiently daring and far more than sufficiently generous, were found for us by a dear friend, who made one woman very 'uplifted.' He also was an editor, and had as large a part in making me a writer of books as the other in determining what the books should be about.

Now that I was an author I must get into a club. But you should have heard my mother on clubs! She knew of none save those to which you subscribe a pittance weekly in anticipation of rainy days, and the London clubs were her scorn. Often I heard her on them—she raised her voice to make me hear, whichever room I might be in, and it was when she was sarcastic that I skulked the most: 'Thirty pounds is what he will have to pay the first year, and ten pounds a year after that. You think it's a lot o' siller? Oh no, you're mista'en—it's nothing ava. For the third part of thirty pounds you could rent a four-roomed house, but what is a four-roomed house, what is thirty pounds, compared to the glory of being a member of a club? Where does the glory come in? Sal, you needna ask me, I'm just a doited auld stock that never set foot in a club, so it's little I ken about glory. But I may tell you if you bide in London and canna become member of a club, the best you can do is to tie a rope round your neck and slip out of the world. What use are they? Oh, they're terrible useful. You see it doesna do for a man in London to eat his dinner in his lodgings. Other men shake their heads at him. He maun away to his

club if he is to be respected. Does he get good dinners at the club? Oh, they cow! You get no common beef at clubs; there is a manzy of different things all sauced up to be unlike themsels. Even the potatoes daurna look like potatoes. If the food in a club looks like what it is, the members run about, flinging up their hands and crying, "Woe is me!" Then this is another thing, you get your letters sent to the club instead of to your lodgings. You see you would get them sooner at your lodgings, and you may have to trudge weary miles to the club for them, but that's a great advantage, and cheap at thirty pounds, is it no'? I wonder they can do it at the price.'

My wisest policy was to remain downstairs when these withering blasts were blowing, but probably I went up in self-defence.

'I never saw you so pugnacious before, mother.'

'Oh,' she would reply promptly, 'you canna expect me to be sharp in the uptake when I am no' a member of a club.'

'But the difficulty is in becoming a member. They are very particular about whom they elect, and I daresay I shall not get in.'

'Well, I'm but a poor crittur (not being member of a club), but I think I can tell you to make your mind easy on that head. You'll get in, I'se uphaud—and your thirty pounds will get in, too.'

'If I get in it will be because the editor is supporting me.'

'It's the first ill thing I ever heard of him.'

'You don't think he is to get any of the thirty pounds, do you?'

'Deed if I did I should be better pleased, for he has been a good friend to us, but what maddens me is that every penny of it should go to those bare-faced scoundrels.'

'What bare-faced scoundrels?'

'Them that have the club.'

'But all the members have the club between them.'

'Havers! I'm no' to be caught with chaff.'

'But don't you believe me?'

'I believe they've filled your head with their stories till you swallow whatever they tell you. If the place belongs to the members, why do they have to pay thirty pounds?'

'To keep it going.'

'They dinna have to pay for their dinners, then?'

'Oh yes, they have to pay extra for dinner.'

'And a gey black price, I'm thinking.'

'Well, five or six shillings.'

'Is that all? Losh, it's nothing, I wonder they dinna raise the price.'

Nevertheless my mother was of a sex that scorned prejudice, and, dropping sarcasm, she would at times cross-examine me as if her mind was not yet made up. 'Tell me this, if you were to fall ill, would you be paid a weekly allowance out of the club?'

No, it was not that kind of club.

'I see. Well, I am just trying to find out what kind of club it is. Do you get anything out of it for accidents?'

Not a penny.

'Anything at New Year's time?'

Not so much as a goose.

'Is there any one mortal thing you get free out of that club?'

There was not one mortal thing.

'And thirty pounds is what you pay for this?'

If the committee elected me.

'How many are in the committee?'

About a dozen, I thought.

'A dozen! Ay, ay, that makes two pound ten apiece.'

When I was elected I thought it wisdom to send my sister upstairs with the news. My mother was ironing, and made no comment, unless with the iron, which I could hear rattling more violently in its box. Presently I heard her laughing—at me undoubtedly, but she had recovered control over her face before she came downstairs to congratulate me sarcastically. This was grand news, she said without a twinkle, and I must write and thank the committee, the noble critturs. I saw behind her mask, and maintained a dignified silence, but she would have another shot at me. ‘And tell them,’ she said from the door, ‘you were doubtful of being elected, but your auld mother had aye a mighty confidence they would snick you in.’ I heard her laughing softly as she went up the stair, but though I had provided her with a joke I knew she was burning to tell the committee what she thought of them.

Money, you see, meant so much to her, though even at her poorest she was the most cheerful giver. In the old days, when the article arrived, she did not read it at once, she first counted the lines to discover what we should get for it—she and the daughter who was so dear to her had calculated the payment per line, and I remember once overhearing a discussion between them about whether that sub-title meant another sixpence. Yes, she knew the value of money; she had always in the end got the things she wanted, but now she could get them more easily, and it turned her simple life into a fairy tale. So often in those days she went down suddenly upon her knees; we would come upon her thus, and go away noiselessly. After her death I found that she had preserved in a little box, with a photograph of me as a child, the envelopes which had contained my first cheques. There was a little ribbon round them.