

CHAPTER VIII—A PANIC IN THE HOUSE

I was sitting at my desk in London when a telegram came announcing that my mother was again dangerously ill, and I seized my hat and hurried to the station. It is not a memory of one night only. A score of times, I am sure, I was called north thus suddenly, and reached our little town trembling, head out at railway-carriage window for a glance at a known face which would answer the question on mine. These illnesses came as regularly as the backend of the year, but were less regular in going, and through them all, by night and by day, I see my sister moving so unwearyingly, so lovingly, though with failing strength, that I bow my head in reverence for her. She was wearing herself done. The doctor advised us to engage a nurse, but the mere word frightened my mother, and we got between her and the door as if the woman was already on the stair. To have a strange woman in my mother's room—you who are used to them cannot conceive what it meant to us.

Then we must have a servant. This seemed only less horrible. My father turned up his sleeves and clutched the besom. I tossed aside my papers, and was ready to run the errands. He answered the door, I kept the fires going, he gave me a lesson in cooking, I showed him how to make beds, one of us wore an apron. It was not for long. I was led to my desk, the newspaper was put into my father's hand. 'But a servant!' we cried, and would have fallen to again. 'No servant, comes into this house,' said my sister quite fiercely, and, oh, but my mother was relieved to hear her! There were many such scenes, a year of them, I daresay, before we yielded.

I cannot say which of us felt it most. In London I was used to servants, and in moments of irritation would ring for them furiously, though doubtless my manner changed as they opened the door. I have even held my own with gentlemen in plush, giving one my hat, another my stick, and a third my coat, and all done with little more trouble than I should have expended in putting the three articles on the chair myself. But this bold deed, and other big things of the kind, I did that I might tell my mother of them afterwards, while I sat on the end of her bed, and her face beamed with astonishment and mirth.

From my earliest days I had seen servants. The manse had a servant, the bank had another; one of their uses was to pounce upon, and carry away in stately manner, certain naughty boys who played with me. The banker did not seem really great to me, but his servant—oh yes. Her boots cheeped all the way down the church aisle; it was common report that she had flesh every day for her dinner; instead of meeting her lover at the pump she walked him into the country, and he returned with wild roses in his buttonhole, his hand up to hide them, and on his face the troubled look of those who know that if they take this lady they must give up drinking from the saucer for evermore. For the lovers were really common men, until she gave them that glance over the shoulder which, I have noticed, is the fatal gift of servants.

According to legend we once had a servant—in my childhood I could show the mark of it on my forehead, and even point her out to other boys, though she was now merely a wife with a house of her own. But even while I boasted I doubted. Reduced to life-size she may have been but a woman who came in to help. I shall say no more about her, lest some one comes forward to prove that she went home at night.

Never shall I forget my first servant. I was eight or nine, in velveteen, diamond socks ('Cross your legs when they look at you,' my mother had said, 'and put your thumb in your pocket and leave the top of your handkerchief showing'), and I had travelled by rail to visit a relative. He had a servant, and as I was to be his guest she must be my servant also for the time being—you may be sure I had got my mother to put this plainly before me ere I set off. My relative met me at the station, but I wasted no time in hoping I found him well. I did not even cross my legs for him, so eager was I to hear whether she was still there. A sister greeted me at the door, but I chafed at having to be kissed; at once I made for the kitchen, where, I knew, they reside, and there she was, and I crossed my legs and put one thumb in my pocket, and the handkerchief was showing. Afterwards I stopped strangers on the highway with an offer to show her to them through the kitchen window, and I doubt not the first letter I ever wrote told my mother what they are like when they are so near that you can put your fingers into them.

But now when we could have servants for ourselves I shrank from the thought. It would not be the same house; we should have to dissemble; I saw myself speaking English the long day through. You only know the shell of a Scot until you have entered his home circle; in his office, in

clubs, at social gatherings where you and he seem to be getting on so well he is really a house with all the shutters closed and the door locked. He is not opaque of set purpose, often it is against his will—it is certainly against mine, I try to keep my shutters open and my foot in the door but they will bang to. In many ways my mother was as reticent as myself, though her manners were as gracious as mine were rough (in vain, alas! all the honest oiling of them), and my sister was the most reserved of us all; you might at times see a light through one of my chinks: she was double-shuttered. Now, it seems to be a law of nature that we must show our true selves at some time, and as the Scot must do it at home, and squeeze a day into an hour, what follows is that there he is self-revealing in the superlative degree, the feelings so long dammed up overflow, and thus a Scotch family are probably better acquainted with each other, and more ignorant of the life outside their circle, than any other family in the world. And as knowledge is sympathy, the affection existing between them is almost painful in its intensity; they have not more to give than their neighbours, but it is bestowed upon a few instead of being distributed among many; they are reputed niggardly, but for family affection at least they pay in gold. In this, I believe, we shall find the true explanation why Scotch literature, since long before the days of Burns, has been so often inspired by the domestic hearth, and has treated it with a passionate understanding.

Must a woman come into our house and discover that I was not such a dreary dog as I had the reputation of being? Was I to be seen at last with the veil of dourness lifted? My company voice is so low and unimpressive that my first remark is merely an intimation that I am about to speak (like the whirl of the clock before it strikes): must it be revealed that I had another voice, that there was one door I never opened without leaving my reserve on the mat? Ah, that room, must its secrets be disclosed? So joyous they were when my mother was well, no wonder we were merry. Again and again she had been given back to us; it was for the glorious to-day we thanked God; in our hearts we knew and in our prayers confessed that the fill of delight had been given us, whatever might befall. We had not to wait till all was over to know its value; my mother used to say, 'We never understand how little we need in this world until we know the loss of it,' and there can be few truer sayings, but during her last years we exulted daily in the possession of her as much as we can exult in her memory. No wonder, I say, that we were merry, but we liked to show it to God alone, and to Him only our agony during those many

night-alarms, when lights flickered in the house and white faces were round my mother's bedside. Not for other eyes those long vigils when, night about, we sat watching, nor the awful nights when we stood together, teeth clenched—waiting—it must be now. And it was not then; her hand became cooler, her breathing more easy; she smiled to us. Once more I could work by snatches, and was glad, but what was the result to me compared to the joy of hearing that voice from the other room? There lay all the work I was ever proud of, the rest is but honest craftsmanship done to give her coal and food and softer pillows. My thousand letters that she so carefully preserved, always sleeping with the last beneath the sheet, where one was found when she died—they are the only writing of mine of which I shall ever boast. I would not there had been one less though I could have written an immortal book for it.

How my sister toiled—to prevent a stranger's getting any footing in the house! And how, with the same object, my mother strove to 'do for herself' once more. She pretended that she was always well now, and concealed her ailments so craftily that we had to probe for them:—

'I think you are not feeling well to-day?'

'I am perfectly well.'

'Where is the pain?'

'I have no pain to speak of.'

'Is it at your heart?'

'No.'

'Is your breathing hurting you?'

'Not it.'

'Do you feel those stounds in your head again?'

'No, no, I tell you there is nothing the matter with me.'

'Have you a pain in your side?'

'Really, it's most provoking I canna put my hand to my side without your thinking I have a pain there.'

'You have a pain in your side!'

'I might have a pain in my side.'

'And you were trying to hide it! Is it very painful?'

'It's—it's no so bad but what I can bear it.'

Which of these two gave in first I cannot tell, though to me fell the duty of persuading them, for whichever she was she rebelled as soon as the other showed signs of yielding, so that sometimes I had two converts in the week but never both on the same day. I would take them separately, and press the one to yield for the sake of the other, but they saw so easily through my artifice. My mother might go bravely to my sister and say, 'I have been thinking it over, and I believe I would like a servant fine—once we got used to her.'

'Did he tell you to say that?' asks my sister sharply.

'I say it of my own free will.'

'He put you up to it, I am sure, and he told you not to let on that you did it to lighten my work.'

'Maybe he did, but I think we should get one.'

'Not for my sake,' says my sister obstinately, and then my mother comes ben to me to say delightedly, 'She winna listen to reason!'

But at last a servant was engaged; we might be said to be at the window, gloomily waiting for her now, and it was with such words as these that we sought to comfort each other and ourselves:—

'She will go early to her bed.'

'She needna often be seen upstairs.'

'We'll set her to the walking every day.'

'There will be a many errands for her to run. We'll tell her to take her time over them.'

'Three times she shall go to the kirk every Sabbath, and we'll egg her on to attending the lectures in the hall.'

'She is sure to have friends in the town. We'll let her visit them often.'

'If she dares to come into your room, mother!'

‘Mind this, every one of you, servant or no servant, I fold all the linen myself.’

‘She shall not get cleaning out the east room.’

‘Nor putting my chest of drawers in order.’

‘Nor tidying up my manuscripts.’

‘I hope she’s a reader, though. You could set her down with a book, and then close the door canny on her.’

And so on. Was ever servant awaited so apprehensively? And then she came—at an anxious time, too, when her worth could be put to the proof at once—and from first to last she was a treasure. I know not what we should have done without her.