

– How I Went Out to Service –
(1874)

When I was eighteen I wanted something to do. I had tried teaching for two years, and hated it; I had tried sewing, and could not earn my bread in that way, at the cost of health; I tried story writing and got five dollars for stories which now bring a hundred; I had thought seriously of going upon the stage, but certain highly respectable relatives were so shocked at the mere idea that I relinquished my dramatic aspirations.

‘What *shall* I do?’ was still the question that perplexed me. I was ready to work, eager to be independent, and too proud to endure patronage. But the right task seemed hard to find, and my bottled energies were fermenting in a way that threatened an explosion before long.

My honored mother was a city missionary that winter, and not only served the clamorous poor, but often found it in her power to help decayed gentlefolk by quietly placing them where they could earn their bread without the entire sacrifice of taste and talent which makes poverty so hard for such to bear. Knowing her tact and skill, people often came to her for companions, housekeepers, and that class of the needy

who do not make their wants known through an intelligence office.

One day, as I sat dreaming splendid dreams, while I made a series of little petticoats out of the odds and ends sent in for the poor, a tall, ministerial gentleman appeared, in search of a companion for his sister. He possessed an impressive nose, a fine flow of language, and a pair of large hands, encased in black kid gloves. With much waving of these somber members, Mr R set forth the delights awaiting the happy soul who should secure this home. He described it as a sort of heaven on earth. 'There are books, pictures, flowers, a piano, and the best of society,' he said. 'This person will be one of the family in all respects, and only required to help about the lighter work, which my sister has done herself hitherto, but is now a martyr to neuralgia and needs a gentle hand to assist her.'

My mother, who never lost her faith in human nature, spite of many impostures, believed every word, and quite beamed with benevolent interest as she listened and tried to recall some needy young woman to whom this charming home would be a blessing. I also innocently thought: 'That sounds inviting. I like housework and can do it well. I should have time to enjoy the books and things I love, and D is not far away from home. Suppose I try it.'

So, when my mother turned to me, asking if I could suggest anyone, I became as red as a poppy and said abruptly: 'Only myself.'

‘Do you really mean it?’ cried my astonished parent.

‘I really do if Mr R thinks I should suit,’ was my steady reply, as I partially obscured my crimson countenance behind a little flannel skirt, still redder.

The Reverend Josephus gazed upon me with the benign regard which a bachelor of five and thirty may accord a bashful damsel of eighteen. A smile dawned upon his countenance, ‘sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought’, or dyspepsia; and he softly folded the black gloves, as if about to bestow a blessing, as he replied, with emphasis:

‘I am sure you would, and we should think ourselves most fortunate if we could secure your society, and – ahem – services for my poor sister.’

‘Then I’ll try it,’ responded the impetuous maid.

‘We will talk it over a little first, and let you know tomorrow, sir,’ put in my prudent parent, adding, as Mr R arose: ‘What wages do you pay?’

‘My dear madam, in a case like this let us not use such words as those. Anything you may think proper we shall gladly give. The labor is very light, for there are but three of us and our habits are of the simplest sort. I am a frail reed and may break at any moment; so is my sister, and my aged father cannot long remain; therefore, money is little to us, and anyone who comes to lend her youth and strength to our feeble household will not be forgotten in the end, I assure you.’ And, with another pensive smile, a farewell wave of

the impressive gloves, the Reverend Josephus bowed like a well-sweep and departed.

‘My dear, are you in earnest?’ asked my mother.

‘Of course, I am. Why not try this experiment? It can but fail, like all the others.’

‘I have no objection; only I fancied you were rather too proud for this sort of thing.’

‘I am too proud to be idle and dependent, ma’am. I’ll scrub floors and take in washing first. I do housework at home for love; why not do it abroad for money? I like it better than teaching. It is healthier than sewing and surer than writing. So why not try it?’

‘It is going out to service, you know, though you are called a companion. How does that suit?’

‘I don’t care. Every sort of work that is paid for is service; and I don’t mind being a companion, if I can do it well. I may find it is my mission to take care of neuralgic old ladies and lackadaisical clergymen. It does not sound exciting, but it’s better than nothing,’ I answered, with a sigh; for it *was* rather a sudden downfall to give up being a Siddons and become a Betcinder.

How my sisters laughed when they heard the new plan! But they soon resigned themselves, sure of fun, for Lu’s adventures were the standing joke of the family. Of course, the highly respectable relatives held up their hands in holy horror at the idea of one of the clan degrading herself by going out to service. Teaching a private school was the proper thing for an indigent gentlewoman. Sewing even, if done in the seclusion of