

When I was eighteen I wanted something to do. I had tried teaching for two years, and hated it; I had tried sewing, I tried story-writing; 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.

I was ready to work, eager to be independent, and too proud to endure patronage.

My honoured mother was a city missionary that winter, and not only served the poor, but often found it in her power to help decayed gentlefolk by quietly placing them where they could earn their bread. Knowing her tact and skill, people often came to her for companions and housekeepers.

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 sombre members, Mr R. described the delights awaiting the happy soul who should secure the job. He described his home 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 friend to assist her."

My mother tried to recall some needy young woman to whom this charming home would be a blessing. And when she turned to me, asking if I could suggest any one, 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."

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 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." "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 me not use such words as those. Anything you may think proper we shall gladly give. The labour 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 any one 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."

"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 do housework at home for love; why not do it abroad for money?"

"It is going out to service, you know, though you are called a companion."

"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. It does not sound exciting, but it's better than nothing."

How my sisters laughed when they heard the new plan! For Louisa's adventures were the standing joke of the family. Of course, the highly respectable relatives held up their hands in horror at the idea of one of the clan degrading herself by going out to service. Leaving the paternal roof to wash other people's teacups, nurse other people's ails, and obey other people's orders for hire - this, this was degradation; and headstrong Louisa would disgrace her name forever if she did it.

But opposition only fired the revolutionary blood in my veins!

"If doing this work hurts my respectability, I wouldn't give much for it. Honour won't let me be idle or dependent. You need not know me if you are ashamed of me, and I won't ask you for a penny."

In spite of the laughter and the lamentation, I got ready my small wardrobe, consisting of two calico dresses and one delaine, made by myself, also several large blue aprons and three tidy little sweeping-caps.

I felt that my muslin hair-protectors would be useful in some of the "light labours" I was to undertake. It is needless to say, they were very becoming.

Josephus meantime had written me several remarkable letters, describing the different members of the family I was about to enter. His account was peculiar, but I believed every word of it and my romantic fancy was much excited by the details he gave.

"You will find a stately mansion, fast falling to decay, for my father will have nothing repaired, preferring that the old house and its master should crumble away together. I have, however, been permitted to rescue a few rooms from ruin; and here I pass my recluse life, surrounded by the things I love. My rooms will naturally be more attractive to you than the gloomy apartments my father inhabits, and I hope you will here allow me to minister to your young and cheerful nature when your daily cares are over. I need such companionship and shall always welcome you to my abode.

"Eliza, my sister, is a child at forty, for she has lived alone with my father and an old servant all her life. She is a good creature, but not lively, and needs stirring up, as you will soon see. Also I hope by your means to rescue her from the evil influence of Puah, who, in my estimation, is a wretch. She has gained entire control over Eliza, and warps her mind with great skill, prejudicing her against me and thereby desolating my home. Puah hates me and always has. Why I know not, except that I will not yield to her control. She ruled here for years while I was away, and my return upset all her plans. It will always be my firm opinion that she has tried to poison me, and may again. But even this dark suspicion will not deter me from my duty. I cannot send her away, for both my deluded father and my sister have entire faith in her, and I cannot shake it. She is faithful and kind to them, so I remain to guard them, even at the risk of my life.

"I tell you these things because I wish you to know all and be warned, for this old hag has a vicious tongue, and I should grieve to see you deceived by her lies. Say nothing, but watch her silently, and help me to thwart her evil plots, but do not trust her, and beware."

Now this was altogether romantic and sensational, and I felt as if I was about to enter one of those delightfully dangerous houses we read of in novels, til a newcomer sets all to rights, after unheard of trials and escapes.

So, firmly embracing my family, I set forth, one cold January day, with my little trunk, a stout heart, and a five-dollar bill for my fortune. "She will be back in a week" was my sister's prophecy, as she wiped her weeping eye.

"No, she won't, for she has promised to stay the month out and she will keep her word," answered my mother, who always defended the black sheep of her flock.

I heard both speeches, and made a tremendous vow to keep that promise, if I died in the attempt - Little dreaming, poor innocent, what lay before me.

How I went Out to Service Louisa May Alcott Part Two 1.

(Rather than remain idle and dependent in the bosom of her family, Louisa decides to take a position in the household of the Reverend Josephus. She fancies that she is entering the world of a romantic and sensational novel).

I arrived at twilight, just the proper time for the heroine to appear; and, as no one answered my modest knock on the rusty knocker, I walked in and looked about me. Yes, here was the long, shadowy hall, where the ghosts doubtless walked at midnight. Pressing in at an open door on the right, I saw a parlour full of ancient furniture, faded, dusty, and dilapidated. Old portraits stared at me from the walls and a damp chill froze the marrow of my bones.

Peeping in at an opposite door, I beheld a luxurious apartment, full of the warm glow of firelight, the balmy breath of hyacinths and roses, the white glimmer of piano keys, and tempting rows of books along the walls. The contrast between the two rooms was striking.

A third door showed me a plain, dull sitting room, with an old man napping in his easy-chair. I heard voices in the kitchen beyond, and entering there, saw Puah the fiend. Unfortunately, all I saw was a mildfaced old woman, buttering toast, while she talked to a comfortable gray cat.

The old lady greeted me kindly, but I fancied her faded blue eyes had a weird expression and her amiable words were all of a snare.

Then she showed me to my tiny room. When I presently descended, I found the old man awake and received from him a welcome full of ancient courtesy and kindness. Miss Eliza crept in like a timid mouse, looking so afraid of me, her buxom companion, that I forgot my own shyness in trying to relieve hers. My mistress was a very nervous little woman, indeed.

A few spasmodic remarks and many awkward pauses brought me to teatime, when Josephus appeared, as tall, thin, and cadaverous as ever. After his arrival there was no more silence, for he preached all suppertime.

"My young friend, our habits, as you see, are of the simplest. We eat in the kitchen. I

could wish more order and elegance, but MY wishes are not consulted and, though my health suffers from bad cookery, I do not murmur. Only, I must say, in passing, that if you will make your batter- cakes green with salt, Puah, I shall feel it my duty to throw them out of the window. I am used to poison; but I cannot see this young woman's stomach destroyed, as mine has been. And, speaking of duties, I may as well mention to you, Louisa, that I like to find my study in order when I come down in the morning; for I often need a few moments of solitude before I face the daily annoyances of my life. I shall permit You to perform this light task, for you have some idea of order. Eliza is so blind she does not see dust, and Puah enjoys devastating the one poor refuge I can call my own this side the grave."

With this, the Reverend stalked gloomily away.

I helped wash up the cups, while Puah chatted in what I should have considered a cheery, social way had I not been darkly warned against her wiles.

"You needn't mind half Josephus says, my dear. He likes to hear himself talk and always goes on so. I sometimes think his books and new ideas have sort of muddled his wits, and he gets dreadfully put out if we don't give in to 'em. But, gracious me! they are so redicklus sometimes and so selfish I can't allow him to make a fool of himself or plague Lizy.

She don't dare to say her soul is her own; so I have to stand up for her. His pa don't know half his odd doings; for I try to keep the old gentleman comfortable and have to manage `em all, which is not an easy job I do assure you."

I had a secret feeling that she was right, and we joined the social circle in the sitting room. The prospect was not a lively one, for the old gentleman nodded behind his newspaper. Eliza, with her head pinned up in a little blanket, slumbered on the sofa, Puah fell to knitting silently; and the plump cat dozed under the stove. Josephus was visible, artistically posed in the luxurious recesses of his room, with the light beaming on his thoughtful brow, as he pored over a large volume or mused with upturned eye.

Having nothing else to do, I sat and stared at him, till, emerging from a deep reverie, with an effective start, he became conscious of my existence and beckoned me to approach with a dramatic waft of his large hand.

I went, took possession of an easy chair, and prepared myself for elegant conversation. I was disappointed, however; for Josephus showed me a list of his favourite dishes, and, with an earnestness that flushed his grey face, gave me hints as to the proper preparation of these delicacies. I mildly mentioned that I was not a cook; but was effectually silenced by being reminded that I came to be generally useful. Mince pies, Welsh rarebits, sausages, and strong coffee! I listened meekly and privately decided to shift this awful responsibility to Puah's shoulders.

Detecting me yawning, after an hour of this, he presented me with an overblown rose, which fell to pieces before I got out of the room, pressed my hand, and dismissed me with a fervent "God bless you, child. Don't forget the eggs for breakfast."

I was up early next morning and had the study in perfect order before the Rev. appeared, enjoying a good prowl among the books as I worked and becoming so absorbed that I forgot the eggs, till a gusty sigh startled me, and I saw Josephus, in dressing gown and slippers, languidly surveying the scene.

"Nay, do not fly," he said, as I grasped my duster in guilty haste. "It pleases me to see you here and lends a sweet, domestic charm to my solitary room. I like that graceful cap, that housewifely apron, and I beg you to wear them often; for it refreshes my eye to see something tasteful, young, and womanly about me. Eliza makes a bundle of herself and Puah is simply detestable."

He sank languidly into a chair and closed his eyes, as if the mere thought of his enemy was too much for him. I took advantage of this to slip away, convulsed with laughter at the looks and words of this baldheaded sentimentalist.

After breakfast I fell to work with a will, eager to show my powers and glad to put things to rights, for many hard jobs had evidently been waiting for a stronger arm than Puah's and a more methodical head than Eliza's.

Everything was dusty, moldy and neglected, except the domain of Josephus. Up-stairs the paper was dropping from the walls, the ancient furniture was all more or less dilapidated, and every corner was full of relics tucked away by Puah, who was a regular old magpie. Rats and mice played in the empty rooms and spiders wove their tapestry undisturbed, for the old man would have nothing altered or repaired and his part of the house was fast going to ruin.

I longed to keep things in livable order. On the whole, it was fortunate, for I soon found that my hands would be kept more than busy with Josephus, who needed much cossetting with dainty food, hot fires, soft beds, and endless service, else, as he expressed it, the frail reed would break.

I regret to say that a time soon came when I felt supremely indifferent to the fragility of a reed that ate, slept, dawdled, and scolded so energetically. The rose that fell to pieces so suddenly was a good symbol of the rapid disappearance of all the romantic delusions I had indulged in for a time. A week's acquaintance with the inmates of this old house quite settled my opinion, and further developments only confirmed it.

How I Went Out to Service Louisa May Alcott Part Three 1.

(Louisa decides to take a position in the household of the Reverend Josephus for one month. Any romantic delusions she has indulged quickly disappear.)

Miss Eliza was a nonentity and made no more impression on me than a fly. The old

gentleman passed his days in a placid sort of doze and took no notice of what went on about him. Puah had been a faithful drudge for years, and, instead of being a "wretch," was, as I soon decided, a motherly old soul, with no malice in her. The secret of Josephus's dislike of her was that he ruled the house, and all obeyed him but Puah, who had nursed him as a baby, boxed his ears as a boy, and was not afraid of him even when he became a man and a minister. I soon grew fond of her.

At first I innocently accepted the Rev's invitations to visit the study, feeling that when my days' work was done I earned a right to rest and read. But I soon found that this was not the idea. I was not to read; but to be read to. I was not to enjoy the flowers, pictures, fire, and books; but to keep them in order for my lord to enjoy. I was also to be a passive bucket, into which he was to pour all manner of philosophic, metaphysical, and sentimental rubbish. I was to serve his needs, soothe his sufferings, and sympathize with all his sorrows - be a galley slave, in fact.

As soon as I clearly understood this, I tried to put an end to it by avoiding the study and never lingering there an instant after my work was done. But Josephus demanded sympathy and was bound to have it. So he came and read poems while I washed dishes, discussed his pet problems all meal-times, and put reproachful notes under my door, in which were comically mingled complaints of neglect and orders for dinner.

I bore it as long as I could. One day he found me scrubbing the hearth. Stranded on a small island of mat, in a sea of soapsuds, I brandished a scrubbing brush, and indignantly informed him that I came to be a companion to his sister, not to him! and added that I should not stay long unless matters mended.

"But I offer you lighter tasks, and you refuse them," he began, hovering in the doorway.

"But I don't like the tasks, and consider them much worse than hard work" was my ungrateful answer.

"Do you mean to say you prefer to scrub the hearth to sitting in my charming room while I read Hegel to you?" he demanded, glaring down upon me.

"Infinitely," I responded, and emphasized my words by beginning to scrub with a zeal that made the bricks white with foam.

"Is it possible!" and with a groan at my depravity, Josephus retired, full of ungodly wrath.

I remember that I immediately burst into song, and continued to warble cheerfully till my task was done. I also remember that I cried heartily when I got into my room, I was so vexed, disappointed, and tired. Then I wrote a comic letter home, and waited with interest to see what would happen next.

Far be it from me to accuse one of the nobler sex of spite or revenge, but after that day a curious change came over the Rev.. Gradually all the work of the house had been slipping into my hands. About this time I found that even the roughest work was added to my duties, for Josephus was suddenly unusually feeble and no one was hired to do his chores. Having made up my mind to go when the month was out, I said nothing, but dug in and worked like a Cinderella.

Eliza spent her days muffling over the fire, and seldom exerted herself except to find odd jobs for me to do - rusty knives to clean, sheets to turn, old stockings to mend, and, when all else failed, some paradise of moths and mice to be cleared up.

If I complained, Eliza at once dissolved into tears. Puah begged me to stay on till

spring, when things would be much better. But I don't think I could have stood it if I had not promised.

But, being a mortal worm, I turned now and then when vengeful Josephus trod upon me too hard, especially in the matter of bootblacking. I really don't know why that is considered such humiliating work for a woman; but so it is, and there I drew the line. Josephus' feet, like his nose, were large, and he never took his walks abroad without having his boots in a high state of polish. He had brushed them himself at first; but soon after our argument I discovered a pair of muddy boots, set suggestively near the blacking-box. I did not take the hint.

The boots remained untouched; and another pair soon came to keep them company, whereat I smiled wickedly. Day after day the collection grew, and neither of us gave in. Boots were succeeded by shoes, and then I knew the end was near.

"Why are not my boots attended to?" demanded Josephus, one evening, when obliged to go out.

"I'm sure I don't know," was Eliza's helpless answer.

"I told Louizy you'd want some of `em before long," said Puah with an exasperating twinkle in her old eye.

"And what did she say?" asked my lord, with an ireful whack of his velvet slippers.

"Oh! she said she was so busy doing your other work you'd have to do that yourself; and I thought she was about right."

I heard it all through the door, and could have embraced the old woman for her words, but kept still till Josephus had donned his slippers with a growl and retired.

Alas! several pairs of boots were cleaned that night, and my sinful soul enjoyed the sight of the reverend bootblack at his task. Thunder-clouds rested upon the Rev.'s martyr'd brow at breakfast, and I was as much ignored as the cat. And what a relief that was! The piano was locked up, so were the bookcases, the newspapers mysteriously disappeared, and a sole-mm silence reigned at table, for no one dared to talk when the Rev. was mute. The others left, leaving me to skirmish with the enemy.

It was not a fair fight. I did my best however - grubbed about all day and amused my dreary evenings as well as I could; too proud even to borrow a book, lest it should seem like surrender. What a long month it was, and how eagerly I counted the hours of that last week, for my time was up Saturday and I hoped to be off at once. But when I announced my intention such dismay fell upon Eliza that my heart was touched, and Puah so urgently begged me to stay till they could get someone else, that I consented to remain a few days longer, and wrote post-haste to my mother, telling her to send a substitute quickly or I should do something desperate.

That blessed woman, my mother, little dreaming of all the woes I had endured, advised me to be patient, to do the generous thing, for I should not regret it in the end. I groaned, submitted, and did regret it all the days of my life.

Three mortal weeks I waited; for, though two other victims came, both fled after a day or two, condemning the place as a very hard one and calling me a fool to stand it another hour. I entirely agreed with them on both points, and clutching my property, announced my departure by the next train.

Of course, Eliza wept, Puah moaned, the old man politely regretted, and the Rev. washed his hands of the whole affair by shutting himself up in his room and forbidding me to say farewell because "he could not bear it." I laughed, and fancied it done for effect then; but I

soon understood it better and did not laugh.

At the last moment, Eliza nervously tucked a sixpenny pocketbook into my hand and shrouded herself in the little blanket with a sob. But Puah kissed me kindly and whispered, with an odd look: "Don't blame us for anything. Some folks is liberal and some ain't." I thanked the poor old soul for her kindness to me and trudged gaily away to the station, whither my property had preceded me on a wheelbarrow, hired at my own expense.

I never shall forget that day. A bleak March afternoon, a sloppy, lonely road, and one hoarse crow stalking about a field, so like Josephus that I could not resist throwing a snowball at him. Behind me stood the dull old house, no longer either mysterious or romantic in my disenchanting eyes; before me rumbled the barrow, bearing my dilapidated wardrobe; and in my pocket what I fondly hoped was, if not a liberal, at least an honest return for seven weeks of the hardest work I ever did. Unable to resist the desire to see what my earnings were, I opened the purse and beheld four dollars.

I have had a good many bitter minutes in my life; but one of the bitterest came to me as I stood there in the windy road, with the sixpenny pocket-book open before me, and looked from my poor chapped, grimy, chillblained hands to the paltry sum that was considered reward enough for all the hard and humble labour they had done.

A girl's heart is a sensitive thing. And mine had been very full lately; for it had suffered many of the trials that wound deeply yet cannot be told; so I think it was but natural that my first impulse was to go straight back to that sacred study and fling this insulting money at the feet of him who sent it. But I was so boiling over with indignation that I could not trust myself to resist shaking him, in spite of his cloth.

No. I would go home, show my honourable wounds, tell my pathetic tale, and leave my parents to avenge my wrongs. I did so; but over that harrowing scene I drop a veil. I will merely mention that the four dollars went back and the reverend Josephus never heard the last of it in that neighbourhood.

My experiment seemed a dire failure and I mourned it as such for years; but more than once in my life I have been grateful for that experience, since it has taught me many lessons. One of the most useful of these has been the power of successfully making a companion, not a servant, of those whose aid I need, and helping to gild their honest wages with the sympathy and justice which can sweeten the humblest and lighten the hardest task.