CONTENT WITH FLIES

MARY & JANE FINDLATER

E. N. Taylor
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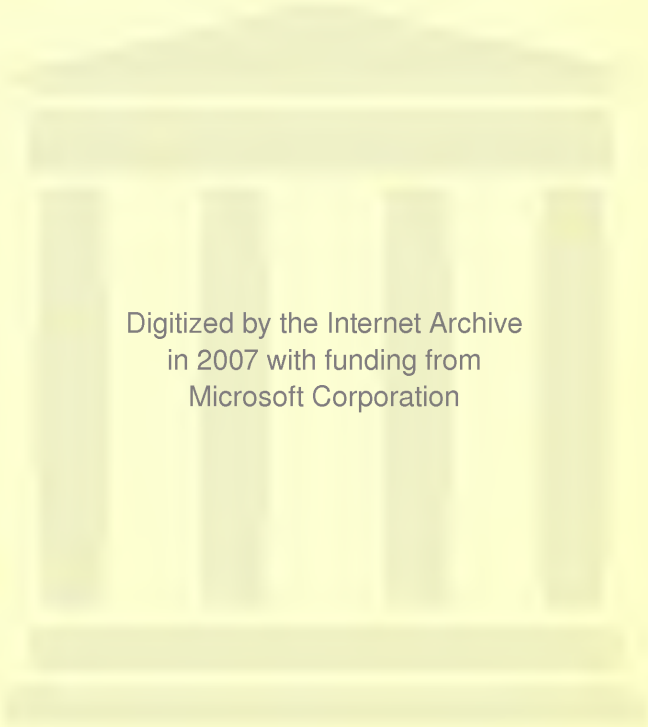

". . . A tiny garden with a few flowers, a row of fourteen bee-hives, and a low-growing apple tree" (p. 23).

CONTENT WITH FLIES

BY

MARY & JANE FINDLATER

AUTHORS OF "CROSSRIGGS," "PENNY MONYPENNY"
"TENTS OF A NIGHT," ETC.

"As cats when they can get no mice
Content themselves with catching flies."

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CONTENT WITH FLIES

CHAPTER I

EVIL DAYS

BEFORE the evil days come, surely it is wise for many of us to consider what our circumstances may be when they are here? They are coming, with swift, stealthy footsteps, as every housekeeper knows; for 'a penny a pound on everything,' when there is only a small fixed income to take it from, will soon leave the cupboard and the larder bare.

It is well to acknowledge that for many people in this country within the next year or two, the main conditions of living must be changed. If the silver paper won't cover the basket no amount of pulling will

make it right; those of us who now are living up to the edge of our income will need to practise more than small economies when the evil days have come. Not pinches here: nips off there; not though we boiled every potato in its skin for evermore, and ate margarine till our last breakfast upon earth; and dined (like Zola) on sparrows, and boiled the bones for soup; not though briquettes smothered our living fires within doors, and flannels washed at home dangled by our drawing-room windows every week; not if we counted the matches, and stewed the outside leaves of vegetables and made bread puddings of the crumbs that were wont to feed the birds—not all put together, will by that time, give some of us that spending margin which is synonymous with an easy mind, or enable us to lead a decently liberal, cheerful existence. Unless, as William James would say, we are prepared to do "something definite and enthusiastic," to

make some large alteration in our scale of living, which will relieve the tension of perpetual worry. Life is scarcely worth calling life if the *necessity for anxiety* is ever with us. How many women have wasted under it! To creep out with a string bag and bargain about farthings is no fitting occupation for any one. Better far to *live* under simpler conditions than to drag out existence in genteel poverty: that, indeed, is "the villa lie."

It is probable that during the coming hard times the whole standard of outward refinement will suffer. Perhaps the flower of civilized living may fade in the meanwhile amongst people of moderate income, and a way of life much less elegant take its place. Certainly even during the last thirty years, the external part of life has become much prettier; but it has also got cumbered with a deal of rubbish. Life has gained in a thousand ways for people on

a small scale of living. There is light and air and amusement in it. Little luxuries and refinements have crept in everywhere; there is better taste in the houses and better service at table. The standard of comfort is higher every year in trifling matters. Servants are more numerous, if none are so devoted. The gardens have increased in beauty, though they produce more flowers than fruit. If all these improvements are swept away by the stress of increasing poverty, it will be a great pity. Still, much that is mere trimming may be removed, leaving the essential beauty and refinements of home unchanged.

"*Never too much*" was the Greek motto. It is safe to say that most of us before the war is over will have an opportunity of testing its worth! So much the better for the style of everything, if the essentials remain untouched. Now is the time for sifting and testing, so that we may hold

more firmly to all that is necessary for a seemly existence, and part from the superfluities without undue regret.

The first and most obvious economy that can produce any big result in an ordinary household is to have fewer servants. Or, to come a step lower (to go a step farther, would be a more courageous way of putting it !), to have none at all ; this at once sets free a good deal of money.

The question of how far it is possible to be comfortable without servants must be answered differently in every household, as the circumstances of its inmates vary. The following chapters only chronicle how a few weeks were spent in this manner, and are of no value as a contribution on economy in other directions.

The incidents we tell of were so trifling and commonplace that they might have been summed up in a few words ; but remembering that generalities are apt to be wearisome, while

a certain amount of detail may interest—and possibly cheer—those who are going to try the same experiment, we make, in an idle hour, this record of it :—

> "As cats when they can get no mice
> Content themselves with catching flies."

* * * *

We sometimes hear talk about the servant problem, and it seems hard indeed that those who have never been troubled by it, should be faced with the possibility of losing Treasures, whilst other people can afford to retain the services of women who apparently poison every hour of their existence. Although in our own case, owing to an early graduation in the school of poverty, we should not be helpless victims of Fate, even if she deprived us of Bridget and Flora, the mere possibility made us resolve to test our capacities beforehand.

We happened just then to be doing nothing, when everyone else was busy. Who wants to be writing novels when the world is at war! The noise and gloom of London, combined with a conviction of our own entire uselessness in the general scheme of things, made the prospect of doing practical work in a cottage most attractive. That, at least, was necessary occupation. The solitude would be refreshing. At all events, we could but try.

An old lady of our acquaintance, whose energies were chiefly devoted to knitting, had a habit of laying down her knitting-pins with a sigh, exclaiming, "But I must away and fight the battle of life!" It was in something of the same spirit that we decided the time had come to try a few months without servants.

But before we began the battle, there were minor difficulties, and almost infinite fatigues to be gone through; it was extremely

difficult to find what we wanted at that season; a suitable cottage eluded us, 'Like the bird in the fable, that flitted from tree to tree.'

No sooner did one seem to be found, than a telegram arrived saying it was not to be had. At long last, after letters and telegrams innumerable, after disappointments, and hopes, and despairs, a cottage really was secured for the months of June and July. It was in the Highlands, miles away from a railway or a town, remote yet not too lonely, and where we couldn't have got servants for love or money, even if we wanted them.

When the matter had been definitely arranged, there followed an inevitable sinking of heart. To counteract this we quoted all the indubitable truths about the wholesomeness of domestic work and reconsidered them.

How often within the past few months

we had seen delicately brought-up girls rendered absolutely happy with dusters and scrubbing-brushes in V.A.D. hospitals. At home they neither toiled nor spun, yet no labour seemed too menial for them now. So, even making all allowance for the high spirits and enthusiasm of youth, might not a residue of satisfaction be found for older people in like simple necessary tasks ?

"*But suppose we find it impossible?*" This thought would dart into the mind at night, chasing sleep away as effectually as a hawk chases the thrushes. An abject whisper: "*Just telegraph for Bridget then.*" "*She couldn't leave our tenants at home.*" A yet more abject suggestion: "*Well, we can always give it up and go into rooms.*" This was true, but poor comfort; there was a letter lying on the table at that very moment from a friend to whom we had expressed the cowardly thought.

"You *like* rooms," she wrote. "Well, of course it's a matter of taste. To me there is nothing in the whole world so dreary. The mere look of the sideboard is enough to depress one to tears—with the single banana and the shrivelled orange upon it that *won't* get eaten." Her derision made hope revive. No cottage could be as bad as that anyhow. Two months, after all, were not eternal; we were not bound to go on to the bitter end should the experiment prove impossible . . . there were kind friends in the North! "If the worst comes to the worst, we can always write about the failure," was our last desperate resolve. We would expend a few shillings on new cookery books, "they tell one everything," and, above all, we would invest in one of the fireless cookers, which were said to be such a wonderful help . . . and so on.

It was well thus to strengthen resolution as far as we could, because the sudden heat

which had come in the end of May made the prospect of toil in a hot kitchen far from alluring; but the cooker would halve all this: labour-saving appliances made work a different thing.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRELESS COOKER

On a breathless morning some days later, when London smelt like an oven, we set out to purchase a few of these labour-saving inventions, especially that fireless cooker, which was to do so much for us in cottage life. I seem to have read in one of the now numerous little books upon the New Thought, a warning against going out to shop in a state of exhaustion or with a flurried mind. "A current of hostile thought," encountered in any way, may then divert your purpose, or a plausible salesman send you back like Moses Primrose with a gross of green spectacles instead of the thing you went out to buy.

This must have been our mistake on that

hot, dusty morning, when depressed and already fatigued we set off in an overcrowded 'bus to hunt for the fireless cooker.

Is it not true that on certain days you have only to decide that you want a particular article, for the British shopman to make it his business to thwart your desire? Such was the fact about our intended purchase that morning.

First of all, in a shop in Victoria Street, we caught sight of what seemed the very thing we were in search of ('twas a French one made in Paris). Confident that all was well we entered the shop, and spent half an hour examining every detail of the cooker, only to be informed by the man who had been showing it off, that it was already sold, and "owing to the war" it was impossible to procure another. He tried to press a patent washing machine upon us instead; finally, summoned from some underground cavern a woman who insisted that

we should buy electric irons. It was with difficulty that we evaded her "current of hostile thought" and managed to escape without them.

There still remained another arrow in our quiver, for a well-known society advertised "a low-priced, practical cooker on the principle of the hay box, so much used in New Zealand." We set off to find it next.

By this time the morning was well advanced. We were hotter than Hottentots and covered with dust, but climbed hopefully up many stairs to reach in the end a room where a lady in pearl ear-rings sat writing papers about war charity. She at once claimed us as contributors. When we mentioned the cooker, she became cold and far away. There was such a thing . . . yes . . . the society had sold its invention to Messrs. Berry and Bombs at the other side of the town . . . yes . . . if we went there she supposed they were still to be had. . . .

So down again we trailed, out into the oppressive streets, and took the district railway to Berry and Bombs.

With sinking hearts we heard ourselves directed "Downstairs, madam—Hardware Department, first turn to the right," and descending a rattling iron staircase, entered a subterranean hall totally without ventilation.

Every shopper knows these gruesome places: lit from above, echoing, solitary. In the far distance a stout woman in black expatiating about the handle of a kettle to a wearied salesman, or two betrimmed ladies, with a dragging child in tow, being waved to some far-off goal with the assurance, "You'll find it in the Fancy Department, three floors up, madam—take the lift."

"The boxes for fireless cooking?" we inquired. "Oh yes, we make them, but we can't take any orders at present," was all the comfort we got. There were rows of them—all ticketed "sold"—we seemed

to be the last of a crowd of people anxious to buy hay boxes. Well, there was no hope there, so away we went, shaping our course through the echoing air-tight hall, set, as those places always are, with rows of empty perambulators, waiting for the great army of babies yet to be. "Born only to die!" was our bitter comment in the fatigue of the moment, as we made our way through their ghostly lines. Wringers and washing-boards were the other goods most in evidence. Woman's work is never done! Was it not a pity that we should think of beginning it just then? Why trail ourselves to the point of flaccidity on a hot morning, trying to find a cooker? Better give it up and try to find a temporary cook.

So ended our search for the morning; by the afternoon we were revived, and resolved that a cooker should be ours before night. Certainly the hostile thought was

flowing strongly that day! This time our search began in a very well-known establishment. Upstairs; up many stairs; the landings twinkled past the door of the lift one after one, till it seemed as if we might have reached the stars. But it was only another Hardware Department, echoing, airtight, bigger than the subterranean one. People might get lost here: in a nightmare might seem to stray aimlessly from one counter to another, interviewing iron-faced assistants and never getting any nearer the way out!

After a long, inconclusive, wearisome discussion at a counter almost dangerously remote, we sat considering two or three cookers each equally alien to our purpose. Some cost more than we could afford. Others required gas or electricity; another "needed constant attention."

"Shall I ask the Buyer, madam?" said the man who was serving us. This sounded

knowledgable. "The Buyer," if any one, could surely recommend the best from his stores of experience. He was summoned, and we explained our wishes. He listened with an air of profound indifference. A fat man, presumably he throve upon his calling: Buyer he may have been, it was clear that nature had not fitted him to sell, for he did his very best to discourage us from purchasing a cooker at all, having evidently decided that we were not to have one. His manner could not have been called polite, and vague recollections came to us of a scene in the *Wide, Wide World* that used to be a terror of our childhood—when Ellen Montgomery buys white stockings from an insolent shopman. Suddenly it occurred to us that either the Buyer wanted a commission, or thought that we did! "Let us explain," we said, "that we have not the slightest interest in pushing the sale of any particular cooker. All we

want to know is which you consider the best ? "

At this the extraordinary being made instant reply, " In that case, ladies, I'm afraid you're just wasting my precious time," adding, with a wave of his hand, " If you take my advice—if you want to do your own work—*you'll leave labour-saving appliances alone*, and fireless cookers too." So saying, he rumbled away.

I cannot pretend to explain his conduct. I only note the fact as it occurred. Of course we bought a cooker on the spot—the one that seemed least unsuited to our purpose—and paid thirty-five shillings for it too. One could have bought a whole edition of Emerson for that money—and had it for the rest of life ! But it was Emerson, after all, who said, " *Heed thou thy private dream* "—and was not this what we were trying to do ?

It was getting late now : a stifling evening when our private dream of a cottage

in a remote glen seemed as different from the rattling crowded streets as anything could well be. The river of traffic in the King's Road rolled along unceasing—noisier and swifter than the real ancient river, that ran softly to its ports not half a mile away.

To-morrow would be June; no one heeded the season this year: perfumed, flower-bespangled, all-too-short, she would come and go almost unnoticed.

A fiercer interest was in the air, in the movements of these thousands of people who gyrated in the hot streets; a common alarm uniting and dissipating them by turns, like swarming ants when the anthill has been stirred.

CHAPTER III

THE COTTAGE

THREE days later, when we arrived in the Highlands, everything seemed too beautiful to be true. But that is an ungrateful thing to say: better to exclaim with Emily Dickinson, "*O matchless earth! we underrate the chance to dwell in thee!*"

A matchless bit of earth it appeared that afternoon as we drove the five long miles from the station to our cottage. So quiet it all was, that a door might have been shut in the sky between the turmoil of London and the vaulted stillness of this great valley. In the limpid atmosphere every crumple on the flanks of the distant hills was visible, and the creaking axle of our old carriage made the only sound. As we came nearer to

the mountains, a delicate shrillness crept into the puffs of scented wind. It revived the very soul, after weeks of the stifling atmosphere of town.

We reached the cottage just as the sun was slanting to the west, and had our first view of it in brilliant evening light. It stood beside a narrow sandy track, that turned off at a sharp angle from the main road. The fields at the side of the little path were unfenced, except by a hedge of broom. Acres of broom were all about amongst the knolls of birch trees—and all in flower. The cottage faced towards the mountains, at the mouth of a deep wooded gorge. Between the black pine-covered sides of the pass, there rose in the distance a high violet mountain still partly covered with snow. To see it there, above all that flowering world, sent a positive shock of pleasure to the heart. It was like the unexpected recognition of a friend one had longed to see ;

"The cottage stood beside a narrow sandy track that turned off at a sharp angle from the main road."

like the right word spoken in a moment of bewilderment; like a dozen other rare and precious things upon this "matchless earth." Worth all the long and dusty journey; worth all the worry about getting the cottage; and far more than worth the rent that we paid for it. We were free to enjoy all this beauty, and to breathe air that would almost make dry bones live, for the sum of some eight pounds a month—with the interest of doing our own work into the bargain.

The house was just a plain little two-storied building. All in front and around before the steeper hills began, were ridges and knolls of green grass covered with birch woods. At the door was a tiny garden, with a few flowers, a row of fourteen beehives, and a low-growing apple tree, scarcely in full bloom even at that season. Indoors the cottage was clean and comfortable. Instead of the sort of 'hen ladder' that generally divides a house of

that size, a pretty twisting staircase led to the two bedrooms that were above the kitchen and the parlour to left and right. The rooms were all a fair size, with two windows in each, and the whole house was in perfect order. We felt that indeed we had "fallen on our feet"—things might so easily have been otherwise!

If we had happened to arrive upon a wet day, soaked through after a five-mile drive in an open carriage, no doubt our impressions would have been very different. We were tired enough as it was, and hungry and dusty, and encumbered with much luggage, so it was not without considerable misgiving that we entered, conscious of being now left entirely to our own resources.

We were like unaccustomed swimmers suddenly thrown into deep water. All must now depend upon our own energy; there was no one to be appealed to for any help.

Our good neighbour (the owner of the cottage) had lit the kitchen fire, and left milk and butter for our first tea. That meal was quickly spread and eaten; then, with almost ostentatious celerity, cleared away and washed up. So far, so good. Then came the unpacking and arranging of all our own possessions; after that, the rearranging of the cottage parlour. Furniture had to be moved about, pictures put away, books and writing materials produced from our boxes—all the commonplace little touches added by which dwellers from a different hut circle disturb the arrangements of rooms like these.

Before everything had been placed to our satisfaction, it was growing late. By eight o'clock we were all as tired as we could be; yet there was no denying the painful fact that the time for another meal had already come!

No Angel Visitant could at that moment have been more welcome than Bridget, if

she had just walked into the kitchen, able and ready to prepare our supper. But a silent, black-faced stove, and a row of clean, empty pans gazed at us, as much as to say, "Help yourselves—no assistance here." Once more we spread a table, declaring to one another that it was delightful to be able to wait upon ourselves, and then ate a supper that required no cooking. Sly preparation for this had been made by the Housekeeper, who was well practised in a bad family habit of "anticipatory fatigue." From the Edinburgh grocer's boxes she produced cold pressed beef and tinned apricots, which were eaten in subdued thankfulness. Then we had to clear away and wash up once more—by the light of a single flickering candle, and with only one basin of hot water.

Nine o'clock had struck and our tempers were now getting near the snapping point. It had been a very tiring day, and three

people, each on a different errand, hurrying about one small kitchen, get in one another's way—especially when the light is insufficient and no one knows where anything is to be found. Out of doors it was still daylight, but within the house lamps and candles were necessary, and had to be prepared and lighted—indeed, even after the supper had all been cleared off, a number of little jobs still remained to be done. We had just learned, too, that the boiler was a sort of maw for water; if hot water was needed for anything, that boiler had to be filled. It *always* needed filling, for the tap kept dropping the whole time, so that the supply was being exhausted as fast as it was put in. Each one of us declared, "I've been filling that boiler every half-hour!" and yet there never was enough of hot water except for a few minutes at a time. Then matches had to be found; the kettle needed refilling, for hot-water bottles were necessary—

the air came in cool enough from the mountains now. The kitchen fire must be attended to; the doors locked; the beds 'turned down'; the parlour lamp put out. Then a late supply of milk had to be poured into basins to 'set' for cream next morning, and the scraps from supper disposed of: that evening I think they were all given to the five lean cats that stole about the byre doors eager for anything eatable. We knew from cookery counsellors—of course knew only too well, that this was all wrong.

"Every *fragment* of meat or fat must go into the stock pot! *All* crusts should be kept and grated down!" cried the Housemaid as she wearily started again to fill the boiler.

"Tuts!" said the Cook, and called, "Pussy! pussy!" to the lean crowd at the back door. After all, it was nature's own way of disposing of scraps, and instinct is generally wise.

* * * * * *

So the day was done; we were warmed and fed; the little house was tidy, and everything fair for the next morning, when the ploughman's wife would come in to light the kitchen fire. It was on the whole with a good deal of self-congratulation that we went to bed about ten o'clock, aching in every limb, but confident that we had made a good beginning.

Even at ten o'clock there was no darkness out of doors. In June there wasn't any real night at all, for a kind of dreamy twilight that betokened morning had begun before the last reflection of the sunset died away in the hollow sky. Air perfumed with honey and birches, came in reviving breaths through the open windows; iced honey, for it had crossed the snow hills first. Even we could not have felt afraid, our neighbour's cottage was so near. "You could almost—yes, you *could*—stretch out your hand, and touch it," someone had told us before we came, and

looking out at night it was pretty to see how the flames of their pine-wood fire made the square of their little windows red.

The old sheepdog, an animal well-bred and dignified to a degree, on whom a weight of years had fallen, made for himself a little nest [curiously chosen indeed—it was just underneath our meat safe] where he curled up and slept the night through.

There was no reason why any one except the neighbours should come or go on our little road, which only led up through the pass, so total stillness fell when the cottage doors were shut. Only in the tiny, busy garden with the hives, amongst the branches of the half-blown apple tree, the bullfinches sang nearly all night long, and an occasional surprising cuckoo would strike his repeating note like a golden hammer on a silver forge.

Thus ended the first day.

CHAPTER IV

NEW BROOMS

Our impatience to get to work next morning resembled the eagerness of Eskimo dogs, who bite and hustle for the honour of getting first into the traces. Very different indeed from the usual state of matters at home! Bridget and Flora might well have exchanged sarcastic smiles could they have seen us, with fur motor coats above our nightgowns, descending the tiny staircase to throw the doors open to the bright burning day.

I have mentioned the ploughman's wife, and this is the moment to confess that we had shirked the most trying part of the morning's work, and had engaged that lady to come in and light the kitchen stove and clean our pots and pans. She, our junior

(alas!) by many years, and the mother of eight, thought nothing of a two-mile walk literally "o'er moor and fen" by six o'clock in the morning. At what hour her own fire was lit, and her brood fed, we had no means of knowing, but we often saw the brood running, toddling, crawling, according to their various ages, about the doors when we passed their house.

Sometimes they were just standing being rained upon, as if they were so many ducks, and we often wondered how they had fared at the dawn of day; for the biggest boy worked on the farm, and Blue-eyes, the biggest girl, was but young still. When we thought, on wet days, of the mops of tangled hair, the sodden woollen clothing, the wee, clammy bare feet, and the general misery of it all, there seemed reason in the outcry against married women working away from home.

Yet here we were, not only encouraging the practice, but in abject dependence on a

woman who forsook her first duties in order to help us to evade ours; that was the plain fact of the matter.

All the same, stifling these pangs of conscience (we have only allowed them free expression now) it was with a thankful heart we found a glowing fire, a comparatively clean scullery, and a boiler full of hot water when we came downstairs.

The boiler of course had to be filled up again after we had carried the bath-water away. This meant some time in the kitchen to begin with. Then carrying pails of water up a narrow curly stair, when dressed as described above, is by no means easy. At one point the pail was apt to tilt forwards so that the scalding water ran down over your feet. Hauling out the bath, too, from the cupboard where it spent the night, required unusual exercise of muscle. That first morning everything went slowly, for none of us knew exactly where to begin.

or what to do about a number of trifling matters—yet before a week was over our days had fallen into a clockwork routine.

Immediately after filling the boiler and carrying up the bath-water for ourselves, hot water had to be taken to the guest (if there was one) who occupied a little room off the kitchen, and never stirred till she was summoned. We then went upstairs to dress, coming down to prepare nine o'clock breakfast—no early tea in cottage life!

Certainly this was one of the most enjoyable hours of the day. Wet or fine, it was cheerful to breakfast in the clean warm kitchen. The tea was nectar; Melrose himself could have found no fault with its preparation, for according to his counsel of perfection "the teapot was carried to the kettle," that bubbled on the so adjoining stove, instead of the kettle being carried to the teapot as too often happens in ordinary life.

Then the scones were light, and the

honey from our own bees tasted of heather, and almost every morning of that month of June the sun streamed in at the windows, as if a wet day were unknown.

Whenever breakfast was over the House-maid went off to her work. No newspapers or letters disturbed our morning calm. The one post of the day came in about twelve o'clock, so no echo of the outside world penetrated our solitude till then, and there was nothing to keep us from beginning what servants call "the heavy work of the day."

It never was really "heavy," for there were three of us to do it in a five-roomed house, not to speak of the ploughman's wife for an hour before breakfast.

Still it is wonderful how work keeps cropping up. We had decided from the first that (if we may apply a slang expression literally) "this was going to be no picnic," and, as far as we could manage, with the

limited means at our disposal, life should be tidy and comfortable all the time.

This did entail a certain amount of really hard work for every one concerned.

When the breakfast dishes had been washed up and cleared away, the Cook and the Bakeress turned to their culinary tasks. By 11.30 the dinner was "on the fire." The scones and oatcakes baked or baking, and the whole little house in perfect order for the day.

Then the post came in, and we rested for a little, cooled down, and read our letters.

Dinner was at one o'clock, and of course the Cook had to give it her attention, more or less, till it was ready. Until each dish had been eaten and approved of, the two cooks appeared a little anxious, indeed almost irritable; refreshed if the meal had been a success; depressed and battered with fatigue if it had been pronounced a failure.

The real *mauvais quart d'heure* came after dinner, for no one can want to stand at a sink washing up greasy dishes just then. However, it is quite inevitable, and twenty disagreeable minutes are soon over.

Then, the table cleared, the floor swept, the sink scrubbed, the dishes put away, the dishcloths hung out on the fence to dry, the scraps disposed of to hens or cats, the rubbish and potato peelings burned, the fire stoked up, the boiler filled for the hundredth time, the front door locked—it was our practice to subside into an hour and a half of well-merited repose.

About three o'clock we began to feel less tired. Life has a way of explaining things as one goes on, and that phrase, which on other lips used merely to amuse, now became full of significance:—"I was just cleaning myself." In Scotch dialect this phrase means much more than mere "dressing"; it marks the difference between Work and

Rest. Very delightful it is to put away an apron, get into another dress, steep the worked hands in hot water, and rub them with glycerine and lemon juice (a face spray of rose water and eau de Cologne is much recommended by the Housemaid as refreshing and inexpensive after a morning of dirty work on a hot day). Such a toilet can only be enjoyed when a clear conscience tells that the house is tidy and the heavy work all finished.

Once "cleaned" for the afternoon it was delicious to sit in the porch reading till it was time for tea. No one who hasn't worked hard all morning can understand the pleasure of just sitting still and reading in peace for an hour or two, whilst the body is rested by the change of thought.

Getting tea and clearing it away scarcely counted as work at all, and by half-past five we were all free to do as we chose. There was really no need to come in again till ten

o'clock at night, if we liked, for our kind neighbour kept an eye upon the kitchen fire, and she took the parcels from the tradesmen's carts if they called when we were out.

Still, it was curious how regularly we came back about the same hour. Habit doth make servants of us all, and if people have always been accustomed to dress and undress and eat and drink at certain fixed times nothing short of a complete revolution in life will change the habit.

Occasionally we did revel in the sense of freedom given by "turning the key in the door," and going out, conscious that only inclination need bring us home, that if we were half an hour—or an hour and a half—late it would make no difference to any one but ourselves.

The last meal was generally a very simple affair. Cocoa and eggs were permitted, but never once did we decline upon tea and bananas, and in general, supper was ample

and well cooked though it had been easily prepared.

But the simplest meal has to be cleared away: this means another not-to-be-evaded quarter of an hour; and all the Housemaid's minor duties had to be attended to. At last we lit a fire of pine sticks in the parlour and settled down for the evening.

These pine sticks were the most comforting fuel ever known. They caught fire instantly, and in two minutes the whole room was filled with dancing light. By this time our little parlour had become quite habitable, so that it was a pleasure to sit there in the evenings. A jar filled with birch branches and bluebells stood on the table; the chairs, it is true, were hard, and the sofa singularly unyielding, but the room was cheerful and comfortable enough with its brilliant wood fire, and the windows open to the never-darkening summer night. Sometimes the half moon would sail up into the

rift between the hills like a white boat entering a fiord, looking so near, on a cloudless evening, that it seemed as if when you had climbed up the side of the hill, you could have stepped on board and gone sailing off through blue seas of sky.

CHAPTER V

THE DAY'S WORK

THERE is no doubt that the first days of a new experience like this are disconcerting. To people who have been accustomed to amble along through a desultory life, the mere sense of being "caught in the wheel of things" is trying, and the knowledge that, however tired you may be one night, the same work will inevitably recur at the same hour next day, produces fatigue in apprehension.

But with a little endurance this soon wears off. Each day the work is easier, and gets done more quickly. In our case by the end of the first week it ceased to haunt us, and after that it became real pleasure.

Our cottage life would never have suited

town dwellers as a holiday. They want to be able to lie on the heather and gaze at the sky by ten o'clock in the morning, or, if they are very town bred, are anxious to be out of doors every minute of the day. And it wouldn't have suited the Week End cottage people either, whose only wish is to idle all the time, eating scratch meals brought ready cooked from home.

The fact must be faced, by any one who wishes to try such an experiment, that every household worthy to be called a home must be run on regular lines. If food is to be sufficient and well cooked, if the house is kept clean and tidy, with pretty rooms well aired and well warmed, *somebody* must work; and if there are no servants, *everybody* must work, regularly too, for a few hours a day.

Even our visitors—we had four in succession—were roped in to do their part, and showed no outward sign of reluctance. Indeed the first of them insisted on cleaning

the boots. We found her sitting at the back door with a row of boots and brushes. "Please don't tell your husband that you did this—he mightn't like it," we observed; but she only laughed and blacked the blacker.

The next friend who came, undertook the doing out of the parlour, and her zeal was so excessive that we tried to curb it in vain. There was one elephantine cushion on the haircloth sofa, a great, heavy thing that had never known firmer handling than a flick with a duster. She hauled it out to the ground at the front door, and beat it with a cane till the dust rose from it in clouds. But that too was a counsel of perfection.

"*Let sleeping dust lie*" was a cottage proverb. We made several; just to take the finicking edge off any worker, who was apt to become self-righteous.

"*It's not lost that a hen gets*" was another.

"*Eternity itself wouldn't suffice to cook a*

haricot bean " was an aphorism of the Cook's —more on that subject when we consider cooking. As regards housework, method, thoroughness and quickness are all that is required to keep a little house in excellent order with a few hours' work.

How often had the Housemaid asked the heedless question at home, " Where does the dust come from ? " Now, panting and overheated, her head covered with a dust cap, as on hands and knees she swept up piles of dust, or chased a spider from the haunted corners of a room that had been thoroughly brushed only the day before, she asked the question with a new intensity, and a real wish to find the answer. Dust is " carried in on the feet," to use a mysterious kitchen phrase, now stamped with truth ; it comes in at the windows ; even the scented gales that blew across the birch woods and the fields of broom must have helped to bring it in ; it falls from the ceilings, from the walls, from

the fires; it's there anyway, always, and no amount of sweeping and daily dusting will ever get rid of it for more than a few hours.

Emptying baths and carrying up big jugs of water is heavy work; so is sweeping; so is rubbing up linoleum; but making beds, if two people do it, is child's play, and setting a table the same—if only it didn't happen, as it always did, to be just the last straw at the last moment, when you wanted to be done with your work.

Boots to be cleaned, lamps trimmed, candles "set" and scraped, water jugs filled and polished, hot-water bottles filled, boots carried up, beds turned down, lamps lit and fires "laid," fires lit, flower glasses refilled, withered flowers removed—such are, mentioned at random, some of the trifles of household management. Taken singly, they involve little effort, yet must all be punctually attended to in any dwelling that is kept in good condition. They are all outside the

heavier work of sweeping and cleaning, but inessential as they may appear to be, leave them undone even for two days, and see what happens. You will discover you haven't a boot to put on, and don't know where to find them ("in an unbrushed pile under the scullery table," let me whisper). The lamps will flare, they have no oil; your candle is encrusted with long stalactites of wax or is burnt to the socket. The matches are lost, the water jug is empty, the grate filled with ashes when you want a fire; the flowers are withered in the sitting-room, and upstairs the beds are still covered with counterpanes. If it is a frosty night—possible at midsummer in these altitudes—and no hot-water bottle has been taken up, 'the last cold bed' could scarcely be colder.

In fact, unless everything is kept just right, all things in twelve hours' time will be quite wrong. At first one is inclined to think that such trifles don't matter. "Oh,

just leave the candles this morning," or "It's surely unnecessary to fill the hot bottles *now!*" one is tempted to exclaim.

Well, no doubt the Lama Rinpoche, alone in his dreadful cell, need keep to no fixed hours; he may rinse his drinking gourd, or scrape the roots he feeds on exactly when he feels so inclined. But it is well to remember that any one who is a member of a family, has part in community life, and this fact alone links up the pettiest cares and punctualities to the great scheme of things—it affiliates even trifles to the "Stern daughter of the voice of God," so that every one who works in a household may echo the closing lines—

> "To humbler functions, Awful Power!
> I now commend Thee."

Unless the same spirit "*that doth preserve the stars from wrong*" is brought into every duty, you may, of course, occupy a cottage, and squatter in it from morning to night, leaving everything to be done anyhow at the

last and wrong moment; you may, of course, be merry in it, and pretend it's all great fun—if you are young and cheerful it probably is—but you won't have fairly tried what family life without servants can be.

I believe there are a few people in ordinary civilized modern homes, who are really gipsies at heart, and to them disorder is not discomfort. They would rather suck a bone by a camp fire than take the trouble to cook and serve a tidy meal. Of such are some very interesting, charming people. And the world is wide; let them do as they please. Good habits, method and order they will find are very quickly unlearned. 'Tis as easy, say the psychologists, as unwinding a ball of string; winding it up again is a different story.

"*Every muddle makes another*" is a cottage proverb that may well be kept in mind in every department of household work.

When a hired servant acts on the happy-go-lucky principle in ministering to our little comforts, we are apt to dismiss her or him, as the case may be, without reluctance. One cannot dismiss one's self, and it is good to be obliged to realize sometimes what a lazy and unprofitable servant Self can be.

CHAPTER VI

A DINNER OF HERBS

SWEEPING and cleaning, however necessary in their own way, are by no means the very first essentials of a comfortable life; the food question comes before all others—even before fire or shelter, and certainly before nicety and order.

Our plans about food to begin with, were based upon presumably sound ideas about nourishment and economy. Of the latter we had heard only too much; every halfpenny newspaper had been hectoring the world on economy for months past. Not a crust or a crumb was to be wasted. The stock pot was to be ever in the background to receive scraps of all kinds. "The pulses" were to take the place of meat, affording

nourishing and tasty dishes at infinitesimal cost. Nuts—but here we paused. We were not drawn to a diet of nuts so far; in the lean years to come we may possibly eat acorns as our forefathers did—but no nuts *yet*.

I may as well state plainly that we were bad economists. The fact is we couldn't use all the scraps. Bread puddings, if continuous, pall; crumbs accumulated, and we seldom wanted them for frying; scraps couldn't always be disposed of, and the stock pot was non-existent. We never even tried to use the outer leaves of the vegetables, and we gave away the dripping—"so there!" as the children say.

I am not here to defend the cooks, those details were their business. I only know that we had very good food, and the cats grew steadily fatter during our stay.

How, I wonder, would the rigid economist recommend one to deal with the oil that

remains in the tin when the sardines have been eaten ? Would even a war economist add *it* to the stock pot ? Yet there was a little, dingy white kitten that had only to see a sardine tin laid at the door, to hurry up and bury her face in it as a thirsty man does in his beaker. A few minutes later she would withdraw her oily whiskers, purring long and loud. To give such zestful enjoyment to any living thing was surely better than adding a spoonful of fishy oil to the mingled flavours of a stock pot ?

Apart from the groceries we had brought with us, our daily breads and meats were supplied by mysterious carts that appeared out of the void, often at unexpected hours. The butcher would hand in a small gory parcel, heavy as lead, at sunset, just when the work of the kitchen was over, and the blessed time of clean hands and arm-chairs had begun ; or the baker would press a sour loaf upon your notice at the very

moment you were dishing the dinner. There was, also, a "general mairchant," who (generally) timed himself to appear with soap or vermicelli at the sacred hour of the afternoon sleep, just when we were sinking into dreamless repose.

No fishmonger ever troubled our rest; there was none. But a friend once bicycled over three miles carrying a filleted haddock at her saddle bow, about four o'clock one afternoon. She was a recent acquaintance then, and the dainty trifle seemed rather unusual when she brought it to the door; in a few weeks, however, we learned *to hope for a herring* as often as she came our way; much as dogs, once fed at table, will beg by your chair ever after. Many a disastrous vacancy in our menu was filled by her kind efforts.

During our first few days hunger seemed to stare us in the face. To begin with, the chief Cook and the Bakeress, though ardent,

were inexperienced, and "the range" had a temper of its own.

Then the beefsteak left by the butcher on his first visit looked like ordinary meat. You had to cook it to find that it was leather.

Next day we procured a bird from the farm. Its appearance suggested the stewpan as the best method of preparation. All morning the Cook hung about the kitchen with an expression of brooding anxiety, for by this time we were hungry for a good solid meal.

Towards one o'clock she lifted the lid of the stewpan, and stabbed at the bird with a fork. A chill ran through her as it struck that iron breast. Half an hour later the "chicken" was on the table. It left a few minutes afterwards, almost untouched. Bread and cheese finished that meal.

"Minced chicken" was the reply to an innocent question as to supper; but we had cocoa and eggs again that evening, and the

five lean cats that slipped about the back door feasted high.

The Cook now thought the time had come to try "the pulses," for it still wanted three days of the butcher's return. Haricot beans (as we all know) contain more of real nourishment than almost any other food. Haricot stew then was to sustain us the next day.

"Well, Daniel may have been fairer and fatter after a diet of the pulses, but we won't be!" was the Cook's bitter comment as we pushed away our plates, and relapsed upon sardines and cheese.

Yes, there were at first three days of distinctly bad food—that cannot be denied. In her kitchen at home the Cook had more than once been treated to the aphorism, "*Needcessity teaches fools*"—and the truth of it was now abundantly proved, for, during the ten weeks of our cottage life, we never had a really bad dinner again.

"Needcessity," stern instructress, soon

taught the Cook even how to prepare a haricot bean. She also taught her several things about cooking which can be learnt from no book, and the result was an ever-increasing satisfaction in the work.

Not that the present chronicler was ever permitted to come near the stove; far too many cooks (there were three, now that an eager visitor who had once been taught to make a custard, was added) were spoiling the broth, so the Housemaid was strictly limited to her own task of cold ablution. "Now *do* keep away from that fire!" someone would call out if she ventured near the stove, or "It's going on all right, if *you* just leave it alone!" or "No, there's nothing *you* can do, except keep out of the kitchen," so with a glance at the toothsome preparation on the table, and the bubbling dish on the stove, she would meekly return to brushing down the stair, or hunting for spiders.

Some of the Cook's experience may be

worth recording. It was then that she made the proverb about the haricot bean, observing that those who meant to live on the pulses must spend a good deal upon fuel.

Centuries of carnivorous forebears have left us with a deep-rooted prejudice in favour of butcher's meat, as the best food of all in a climate like ours. No doubt vegetarian dishes are more troublesome to prepare. Still, when meat is hard to get, and of inferior quality, they do come in a very useful second. Let the woman who wishes to economize, buy some French fire-proof dishes, and set herself to the study of vegetarian cookery, laying aside as impracticable most of the uncooked foods that are sometimes so highly recommended. For if her family are going to change their carnivorous tastes they must be gently led to do so by well-cooked suitable dishes. There may be some persons in these islands of such sound constitution that they can assimilate

even uncooked food, but the housekeeper who is trying vegetarianism had better remember that a supper of raw lettuce is enough to kill an aunt, and if her family dines on nuts and cheese, she must expect some curious displays of temper the next day.

With *very careful cooking* it is surprising how good many vegetarian dishes can be. But immense care, time, and unrelaxing attention must go to the preparation of them. Long and gentle cooking are required to prevent them being abominable—best summed up in the Biblical phrase, "a mess of pottage."

Well, we had the time, and had to cultivate the unrelaxing attention, whilst an indifferent stove provided the "gentle heat" unbidden, and very soon the pulses became extremely popular, almost ousting the steaks and roasts of former days.

It cannot be denied that we shrank from the frying pan, for grease is, of all kitchen

trials, the most deadly. There is a haunting quality in the air too, for some time after food has been fried. The technical description, beloved of cookery teachers, of "frying in deep fat," has somehow a suggestion of bathing about it—"*Plunge* the frying basket," is one of the clauses, "into the deep fat," and how weird to watch till a blue smoke hovers (or ceases to hover ?) on the surface! That method was not often tried in our kitchen. A casserole is easily cleaned compared with a frying pan . . . after kippers, for instance, what an adhesive suggestion of the meal remains to be dealt with! After bacon and eggs fried—what a deep dark residue of grease coagulates in the pan, the moment it is taken off the fire!

Although we hadn't a drop of hot water in the little scullery, and the cold tap ran muddy and languid from the peat stream; although we were absolutely without all "labour saving appliances"—for our fireless

cooker sent off the day we left London had never yet arrived—in spite, I say, of all this, the cooks began to enjoy the work of keeping the scullery clean. The chief Cook even developed a sombre passion for cleaning the sink, and declared that she found many a so-called amusement much duller doing. To stand back, and see the zinc surface polished white, evidently gave her great pleasure, for sink cleaning had become an art, and was no longer a drudgery.

The only drawback was its effect upon the hands, for when all is said and done, after taking care, and using mops, there always does remain one ultimate rag to be squeezed out, and in time it produces that strange effect upon the hands which only hot, greasy water can give. Curious, when oils and creams (in plain words, other forms of grease) and warm water are so recommended for keeping hands beautiful, that hot dish-water and cooked grease should be so destructive !

Rubber gloves do prevent this; but rubber gloves are a frail joy, "difficult to keep," as the old man said to the dentist about his teeth, and "expensive to lose." A pair of gloves a week, with careful usage, would suffice for constant dish washing; 1*s.* 9*d.* a week would be £4 11*s.* a year for rubber gloves. A nice little Christmas gift to any one who is leading the servantless life—and she would probably rather have a new muff!

"Needcessity" had meanwhile taught us another lesson. The baker's bread was sour and sandy, his scones and rolls were worse; our alternatives were a box of cabin biscuits, excellent of their kind, but splintering to the teeth; and a rich cake, specially prepared by an Edinburgh confectioner for "our gallant fellows at the front."

Suddenly one morning Cook number two borrowed a girdle (this, O English reader, is not a sash, but an iron plate for baking on the fire). She borrowed a girdle, and as if

by a miracle produced the most delicious scones. After this it became her daily task, and we had no more complaints about sour bread, for good scones are nicer the second day even than the first.

CHAPTER VII

BIRDS AND BROOMSTICKS

INCIDENTS of any kind, during these long, bright days, were few and far between. We seemed rapidly becoming perfect hermits, in a happy corner of our own—ah! so far away from the fighting, anxious, stricken world. The simple necessary tasks; the remote place; the dazzling weather all helped to this result. Sitting one day at the door, we watched the gnats dancing in the sunshine their endless, futile reels, and wondered if the gyrations of mankind were more purposeful? 'Where ignorant armies clash by night'—to what end? For what cause? Propelled by what forces? How remote and unreal the war seemed just then—there was not a quiver from the

great agitation anywhere in our still atmosphere.

That had been one of our mornings of "heavy work," after which we were too tired even to read. It seemed better to sit listening to all the little country sounds that had now become so familiar to us.

There was the continual murmur from the fourteen hives in the garden. Then the cows at the same hour every afternoon went stumbling past to the byre. A yellow-hammer sat always on the chimney between three and four o'clock and twittered over and over again his tiresome little song. Many small birds were attracted by the beehives, and we began gradually to distinguish their notes. As we sat by the door on that very still, very gorgeous afternoon, we noticed, after the roulades and tinkles of the bullfinches and yellow-hammers had ceased for a time, a low, continuous sound in the hedge beside us. A note so humble that it couldn't have

been called a song: it was only a faint, liquid whistle. Presently we saw a tiny, wedge-shaped grey bird, with infinitesimal, clingsome feet, that glided in and out between the branches of the beech hedge like a noiseless, living shuttle. It must have been possessed of wings, I presume, because it had feathers, but was more like a mouse than a bird in the manner of its going. All alone, in the brilliant afternoon, it slipped about its own affairs; catching a fly or two; perhaps picking up a dead bee—though that seemed too big game for it. What about? To whom? Why? did it utter its infinitely plaintive, scarcely audible call. One felt the rhythm of the yellow-hammer was intelligible, and could guess why the bullfinches sang late and began again before the day—but this was a riddle.

It was not to be solved that afternoon, for just as our thoughts had reached this

stage, we glanced up and saw an unknown man coming towards the house.

Nothing sensational was going to happen —no incident of an exciting nature at the cottage—this was only a tramp selling heather brooms and "pot ranges" as they are called in Scotland.

He paused at the door. A tall, gaunt wreck of a man, burnt by sun and wind, with deep-set, bloodshot, but wonderfully intelligent eyes looking out from his hollow temples. He knelt on one knee to show off his wares, glancing up every now and then as he talked on, to see how his tale was received. . . . From one glen to another he wandered—choosing the most remote places, where the heather grew best suited for his brooms. "It's not every one that can make them, leddy." We were sure of that —they were a work of art in their own fashion. He brought one later on, that was like nothing but the broom-stick in a fairy tale. The

sight of it transported one back to childhood in a moment. Set on a sweet-smelling cherry-stick with polished bark, the broom made of crimson and russet heather twigs, long and supple and spraying out like a fan—a broom to sweep the cobwebs out of the sky—a broom on which Cinderella might have leant just after the clock struck twelve—and the price of it was sixpence! The pot ranges were little bunches of twigs tied hard together in bundles. He sold them to the shepherds' wives and the women in the lonely farms. Sometimes he would spend two or three nights at a time out upon the hills, for the heather grew breast high there and made the best brooms. . . . "Oh! an awful war . . . reaching everywhere. There was a shepherd at the head of one of the glens, whose only son had been killed, and he was going mad with grief—yes, every time he passed that way the man was worse. . . . Times were hard . . . a man like

meself, leddy, can hardly get a livin'. Yes, I'm from Ireland—I'm too old to fight, but what tricks thim Germans is up to!" (With a glance that seemed full of occult information.) "Haven't I heard all about them from a friend of me own *in the Intelligence Department?*" The last words were spoken low with another glint upwards. Probably he was talking nonsense. With a shilling for his brooms, and some gingerbread and cheese for his tea (accepted with patient dignity!) he shouldered his bundle, and swung off again up the glen.

We offer no explanation, and merely state the fact, that a broken-down tramp selling heather brooms told us he had a friend in the Intelligence Department. Well, there must be curious possibilities in that subterranean profession!

CHAPTER VIII

BLUEBELLS AND CAULIFLOWER

THE whole month of June there was scarcely a shower of rain. One windless, shining day succeeded another, and with every day the beauty around us increased, until we felt inclined to cry out with the disciple, "To what purpose is this waste?" The beauty was spread wide, for very few people to enjoy. The days were so like one another that we got quite mixed about dates, and had to look at the heading of the newspaper to assure ourselves that Saturday wasn't Monday. It would be impossible to give anything like a diary of our life, because there was nothing to chronicle of greater import than walking one day on the moor and the next day up the glen. Although

the entry, in a certain celebrated journal, "*William gathered sticks*," fills one with sudden interest after nearly a century, ordinary 'cottagers' cannot afford to go into such detail. Suffice it to say that we did the same work at the same hours, and went a different walk daily, for their variety was endless, and each one brought you to a scene quite unlike the others.

The little morning walk to the farm was only down half a mile or so of sandy road; but the road had a deep border of bluebells under a hedge of flowering broom, so that in sunshine the effect was often quite dazzling. Bluebells have been mentioned very often because they formed our only decoration. In looking back one remembers them everywhere—on the roadsides and in the hayfields later in the summer, mixing with clover and flowering grass.

If you pulled them with sufficiently long stalks and shook the bunch close to your ear,

they rustled out a faint peal telling of elfin joys; of recurring summer, and the sun's return to those fields that had lain so bare and rigid under the long storms of a semi-arctic winter: where everything was now growing and pushing for its place in the sun.

The birch woods on the knolls that surrounded the house were haunted by the evil presence of poison mosquitoes, but were beautiful beyond a dream. The trees stood on milk-white stems amongst deep, dry, green, or golden moss, or were scattered in the turfy hollows. They leant and whispered together in a glimmering world of their own that seemed to exist apart, unconnected with the surrounding moors or the pine forests and the hills above.

On our first arrival we had planned spending much time in the birch woods; we meant to have tea there often; even supper, when we felt energetic. We meant to sit for hours there reading—the place was just

"The birch woods . . . haunted by the evil presence of mosquitoes were beautiful beyond a dream."

near enough to be convenient. Alas, however, we soon found it impossible to linger there for even a few minutes. The mosquitoes were no common ones: a single bite would cause an arm or a foot to swell up hideously in a few hours, and no household remedy had the least effect. Common midges are bad enough; but these creatures were a regular danger. We often had to walk when we wished to sit out and be lazy. The only spot safe from them was our own garden, and we never dared to sit anywhere else out of doors unless smeared with soap, and a preparation of thymol that mosquitoes were supposed to dislike.

At a short distance from the corner where our road met the highway, set amongst golden fields, stood a little white-harled church. Very old it was, though its thatched roof had been replaced by a slated one long since. A pathetic tinny old bell not much louder than a cow bell would have been,

sounded once a week from the minute belfry, summoning the few worshippers who slowly assembled in the little building. The church stood in a walled enclosure shaped like an irregular circle; on either side of the end gable there was a tree of flowering hawthorn —whiter than the whitewashed walls; and amongst the long grass a few old tombstones huddled like a sheltering flock. In that very building centuries ago there had been a dreadful scene of revenge and slaughter —one man only escaping from his enemies after the thatched roof had been set on fire. Now infinitely humble and peaceful, standing between its white trees with the fields around it golden with buttercups, could one believe that anything more exciting than a bee on the window-pane or the dropping of a child's penny had ever disturbed its calm?

Some three miles beyond the church an iron bridge spanned the river, and on the other side there was a small railway

station with an incredibly hideous villa-village grouped above it. Our expeditions there were very limited: once to meet a friend: once to see one go; and two or three times to lay in some stores from the grocer's shop. Happily the village was so far out of our sight and sound that unless we deliberately went in search of it, we never knew it was there. But remote and exquisite as our situation was, we did find it convenient occasionally to be able to purchase an onion or a tin of cocoa without driving for five miles or sending to Edinburgh for it. Even a cauliflower at times could be brought home—a wonderful prize in a district where vegetables were very scarce.

The mention of a cauliflower recalls in an instant the dark day in our annals that marked the arrival of the fireless cooker.

June being half over by this time, we had almost forgotten to hope that the cooker would ever come. "No word," as the natives

say, had we heard about it since we left London.

Then one morning the postman reported a package of great weight to be "lying at the station" five miles away. It seemed likely to lie long there, for no effort could be made to rescue it. Finally a carter, who happened to be going that way, agreed to bring it back in his empty cart. It had been a grilling hot morning, when the cooks were "feeling the fire" a good deal. But here was help—enlightened help at last! "How wise of us to spend that £1 15*s.* on the cooker!" we said. We even paid blithely an extra 3*s.* 6*d.* for carriage, and congratulated each other that a new era was about to dawn.

No more "hanging over the fire" on hot mornings. "Just bring the food to the boiling-point, pop it into the cooker, and forget all about it till dinner." No more cooking hot supper when we come back tired from a long walk—"merely open the cooker and place

"Here and there the bell-heather spread in exquisite tufts, rose-red amongst its grey-green leaves."

your steaming dishes on the table." The first experiment was to be clear soup and semolina cheese for supper. Both were prepared about 3.30, thus depriving the Cook of her coveted hour of quiet reading before tea. But as the whole evening would be free with nothing farther to prepare, she gladly made the sacrifice.

On the strength of this presumption, we took a particularly long walk that evening, a climbing, scrambling walk up the mountain path that ran across a shoulder of the hill. By this time the bell heather and the ling had come out, and its deep crimson patches looked like Persian rugs thrown upon the neutral-toned spaces of the burnt hillsides. Here and there the bell heather spread in exquisite tufts, rose-red amongst its grey leaves. We had climbed far, and on our slow return remarked, "How nice to find supper all ready waiting—no cooking to do *now!*" Material creatures—to be thinking about

hot suppers as we came down from the hills, through the summer twilight, amongst bell heather and dew, with cuckoos calling across the empty moors! But we were all hungry as well as tired, and there was a solemn pause when we assembled in the kitchen to watch the Cook open the fireless cooker. The soup (tepid) was eaten in haste without comment. The next course came on, but certainly only hunger could have made it possible to eat the half cold, slimy, sticky mass that ought to have been semolina cheese. It smelt penetrating—yet not savoury. The Cook assured her victims it was "just as nutritious." It also was consumed without lingering at the feast. Perhaps, we concluded, the pans had not been shut tightly, or the asbestos mat had not been put firmly enough between them.

Hard biscuit and peppermints erased the memory of disaster, for that evening at least.

The death-knell of the "Keepot" was struck next day, by a misguided attempt to cook one of those prized cauliflowers. "Cold meat and a hot vegetable," the Cook said, "will be enough for dinner—that will give us a long morning with nothing to do, for the cauliflower cooks itself."

The "Keepot," you must know, was an air-tight receptacle, on the principle of a thermos. As no air was supposed to enter, by the same calculation no fumes could issue from it. Judge, then, of our dismay when, as time went on, a faint odour stole into the kitchen; not the wholesome, rather heavy smell of boiling cauliflower we were all acquainted with, but something between that of vegetable refuse and an old gas pipe. "Just the cauliflower shut up as it steams," said the Cook lightly, and turned us out of the kitchen. Half an hour passed, and she became uneasy. Lifting the heavy lid of the cooker, she pulled out

the sealed pan and opened it. Impossible to believe that one small cauliflower could have condensed the volume of poisonous vapour that immediately filled the kitchen and even rolled out into the passage. Yet there it lay, smaller than ever, green no longer, but a bright brown like seaweed and exuding this terrifying smell.

A deep hole was quickly made in the heart of the glowing fire, and in it the altered vegetable was done to death. There still remained the task of cleaning the cooker. Hot water was scarce in the cottage, but pails of it were dashed over the "Keepot." Soap, soda, open air, sunshine, wind, and the dews of night—all time established methods were tried and tried in vain. Then we abandoned the cooker for good. Neither of the cooks could ever be persuaded to touch it again, and the Housemaid wasn't allowed to try.

The question that tormented us afterwards

was this. Had that stout salesman who sold us (or rather, who did his best to keep us from buying) the cooker, been an idealist of the first order—one who would not make his judgment blind, and so persisted in warning off intending purchasers from an invention warranted only to disappoint?

His parting words rang in our ears now. "If you're thinking of doing your own work, and take my advice, *you'll leave labour-saving appliances alone.*"

Did he really warn us for our good, or had he some sinister motive in the background? We shall never know.

CHAPTER IX

A NEW DEPARTURE

By this time June was nearly over, and the weather had become darker. There were long warm grey days, sunless, and sometimes rather oppressive, when thunder growled amongst the hills. The flaming broom shook off its petals and the colouring of the woods grew less vivid. But the ling and bell heather, now in blossom, made effective splashes of crimson on the dark hillsides under the grey sky. These were the days for walking on the moors in the evening, when the air freshened.

Long high ridges, more like artificial terraces than natural formations, lay along the lower slope of the mountain beside us. They were threaded with narrow sheep tracks

running a hundred ways. From the top of one of these terraces you looked across a great stretch of moor to distant lochs that shone at the edges of the pine forest. Halfway between, dropped in amongst the wastes of flat heathery land and the marshes, there was a round piece of water, too small to be called a loch. It also looked as if it were artificial—like one of the Sussex dew-ponds. It might have been a circular mirror let into the grass.

One evening we left the path on the ridge and followed a sheep track down and down to the level of the moor, skirting the edge of the marshes until we finally came to the long stretch of flat heathery ground beyond them. The pool was in the middle of this, farther away than we had thought, and the heather gave place to dry grass for half a mile around it.

Giotto's ○ was not more perfect: sunk deep in a border of pale green and

rose-coloured velvet moss, it measured only some twenty yards or so from side to side, and was tenanted by one wild duck.

When she saw us she flew clucking across the pool trailing the tips of her wings in the water, summoning her brood to take refuge amongst the reedy grass on the other side. The circles caused by her plunge spread out and out till they lipped the edges of the shore and the mirror-like surface was disturbed. We felt it an intrusion to have come suddenly into any place so distinctly private as that pool. It seemed as if we had walked unannounced into a stranger's home: the duck was the owner, and so evidently annoyed!

The whole thing made a scene of Japanese simplicity. The flat empty moor; the grey sky; the round pool with its border of rose-red moss, and its solitary bird: that was all.

But at night, when the moon was up,

"The road up the pass was the loveliest of all."

surely some beautiful Presence, passing, would look at itself there? One duck could not be occupant enough for so curious a place.

Though the moorland walks were delightful, the road up the pass was the loveliest of all. It had the drawback of being almost a public road, and you were liable—perhaps after you had just seen a deer come out of the wood, and spring across the pathway—to meet round the next corner a hired carriage containing a varied selection of tourists. All the tourists that summer wore an expression of fixed gloom. Still, the road in June and July was really very lonely, and on most days you could walk for miles without sight or sound of human life. Far down below the road ran a little ravelled burn, never dry, for it was fed from the hills above. The sides of the gorge grew very steep as the path wound up to its highest point. Then, when it turned a sharp corner, there was always the same shock of delight

that came with the view of the mountains beyond; the surprise, the uplift of spirit received from the sight of the snow wreaths above never failed.

It is not good to be always trying to read definite meanings—our own petty and condensed ideas—into the vaguer impressions we receive directly from nature; enough that to one's deeper consciousness a sign had been given, untranslatable it might be, except in a sense of quickened life; an austere comfort somehow ran into the heart from that reminder of winter in the hottest day.

As the end of July drew near we all began to be sorry that we had to leave the cottage; it had been let to other tenants for two months, so we had no choice. We talked dismally of the coming change—the flatness of such a speedy return to ordinary life; and then suddenly decided that it could not be. We would find another cottage,

and enjoy a few extra weeks of work. But this was more easily said than done. We spent a discouraging afternoon jogging about in the farm vehicle, from one far-off house to another. None of them were the least suitable; some too small, others too big; some too lonely, and any that we cared for were already let. It even crossed our dejected minds that we might have to take refuge in one of the gruesome little villas above the station, or sit down to pick sphagnum moss in the seclusion of "rooms with attendance" for want of anything better.

Then, late in the twilight, when hope had almost departed, we came all at once to the very thing we were in search of. This was a little old cottage which we had passed, without noticing, several times. It stood by the roadside—a small, low-doored, white-washed house, turned coyly away from the highroad, but with one tiny window like an

eye, glancing sideways towards the village in the distance. Whereas our first cottage had been new, this was very old, and we had scarcely crossed its threshold before we felt it must be ours. There were difficulties: no mother of eight could come at 6.30 to light our stove here. Besides, "a lady from Portobello" had taken it for September, and was "thinking of taking it for August." She had not yet made up her mind. Well, we had made up ours. Standing in the wide, old-fashioned kitchen of the Mill Cottage, we were convinced that ultimately, in spite of any number of ladies from Portobello, or Musselburgh, or Timbuctoo, it would soon receive us. Therefore we felt no surprise when we heard a day or two later that we might become its tenants on the following week.

Then, with horrid inconstancy, we began to look forward to the move! We could only work off our impatience by giving the

old love an extra cleaning before we were on with the new; and to pack up, leaving an empty house absolutely clean and in perfect order for the incoming tenant, without assistance, is no easy matter. It kept us very busy for the last three days.

"Without assistance" have I said? No, indeed, for the same friend who brought us the few small fishes, came over unasked (I think?), a distance of several miles, carrying, this time, a packet of dusters and an O-cedar mop. With this marvellous instrument she exerted herself to help our house-cleaning in a way we blush to remember. Without her it would scarcely have been possible to make the proud boast that we left every corner of the little house as clean as we had found it.

Two whole months since our arrival had passed (as Buckle said of thirty years in a library) "like a dream." We had never felt an hour of dulness, though a good many

hours of fatigue; but on the whole it is very seldom in a troublesome world that any plan is carried out with so few drawbacks. Looking back it was not easy to find any. The midden (so inevitable on a Highland croft) was one—certainly a midden anywhere near a house *is* a drawback; the poison mosquitoes were a second; the want of hot water in the scullery a third; then the fact that the only room we could offer to a visitor was a cupboard-like apartment off the kitchen was another—and the armchairs were not comfortable.

But what trifles—all except the mosquitoes, which were a real danger—what trifles to set against nine weeks of heart's content! What a small price to pay for those impressions of remote beauty; and thirty hot, dazzling days of an unclouded June; for the constant sight of snow hills, and the crimson spreading over the moors as the heather came into flower; for all the small

delights, and even the disappointments, of our first efforts in the servantless life.

These were already beginning to bear fruit. We were entering the new cottage with an almost upsetting self-confidence—had even said, "Oh, we can do it ourselves," when we found the ploughman's wife could not light our stove. Our capacities were not to be so tested, however, for an apple-cheeked girl was produced, who declared herself able and willing to rise at 5 a.m., and come on her bicycle to light our fire by half-past six.

CHAPTER X

THE MILL COTTAGE

On a wet, warm afternoon "between showers" we set out to walk the two miles and a half to our new dwelling. The luggage had gone in a farm cart. The future looked very promising in spite of the rain. The wet birches scented the air deliciously, and we gathered a huge bunch of the inevitable bluebells, and some long-tasselled branches of birch to mix with them, for the adornment of the new parlour.

Thus armed, we reached the Mill Cottage about three o'clock, and walked boldly in. No longer the timorous creatures we had been when we arrived two months before—afraid of kitchen work, beset by fears of uneatable food and mysterious difficulties with

"the range"; but full of self-complacency, and as conscious of efficiency as any cook or housemaid could have been.

"'*Can do*' *is easy carried*" is not a proverb of our own, but one that used to be quoted to us in childhood. And "can do" was carried into the new cottage with a very light heart that afternoon.

The house, as I have said, stood close to the main road. It was built on the top of a high bank above the mill stream. Across the stream the ground rose again in a steeply sloping field full of wild flowers. The mill was just opposite our cottage—a large old building now empty and silent, its wooden wheel hanging idle. The only restless thing in the picture was the mill stream. Turned from its natural course on the moorland above, it rushed with the fury of a thwarted instinct along the artificial channel, down the slide, round a sharp corner, and between the steep banks. Then

it darted like a blue snake below the wooden bridge that spanned it at the cottage door, and disappeared finally under the larger stone bridge to flow on through the fields to the river.

Our first afternoon, of course, was spent in arranging the house: light work this time to us all. We had become almost dangerously competent. In less time than it takes to write about it, the rooms were whisked into order. No cleaning was required, for everything was spotless. There were "possibilities," as house decorators say, in this cottage, low and old-fashioned as it was—it had *width*, a quality that modern rooms on a small scale are curiously without. At one side of the door was a low-roofed, roomy parlour with some good old bits of furniture, and one wall panelled in wood. The cross lights from the minute windows gave a very cheerful look to the room, and after a big fire had been lit in the cold grate the stuffiness soon disappeared. Only a trifle

of readjustment was required. The table had to be pushed away from the middle of the room, and the gorgeous stuffed cock pheasant that stood on it removed to a slightly less conspicuous perch. Our bluebells and birch branches were then arranged in a jar, making the room to us, at least, seem quite attractive.

The kitchen was delightful indeed, although the heavy beams on the roof had been papered, and an indifferent "range" now filled the great fireplace. One realized that the stirring life of a large family had gone on here long ago, in days when home feeling was very deep. Panelled cupboards filled one wall of this room too, made, I think, from the doors of the old box beds. The delicate heart-shaped brasses on the keyholes were never bought in a modern shop. But some modern touches which were improvements had been added to the little house, for there was a scullery with a concrete

floor, and a white china sink that certainly had not been there in the days of the box beds and the open fire.

A morsel of a window above the sink looked straight across the moor to the mountains in the distance. The cow would put her face close to the sill, and stand gazing in at us with deep dreamy eyes, while we washed the dishes. More of the cow later on. She was a nice beast, milk-white, and somewhat emaciated. A black velvet calf ran at her side, and they shared the little flowery field with a black satin pony—a pretty, unshod creature that looked extremely decorative against the background of yellow and blue flowers, which was divided by the glancing blue stream. These animals always moving just before our windows added great interest to the picture. There were many hens, too, and five great hoarse-voiced dreadful ducks —eaten (though not by us), unregretted, at an early stage in our occupation of the cottage.

At the same hour every morning, our landlady would appear at the door of the mill. She swept out into the open space in front of her house, and then, followed by the animals, with her little grandson trotting by her side, would sail along to feed the hens; the ducks in a gabbling drove waddled in the rear of the procession. An old woman now, she was gifted by nature with that curious dignity of carriage, that touch of grace which long outlives the mere beauty of youth.

It was a sight to see her, in her plain black gown and little shawl, sweep on towards the hen-house, the cow soberly pacing close behind; the pony (little beauty!) tripping on its dainty unshod feet, now and then giving a caper as if to testify that it found the pace rather slow. Thus they came to the hen-house, and then the old woman scattered grain to her red hens, and finally even quieted

the importunate ducks with a share of the "hen's meat."

The one disadvantage of the Mill Cottage lay in its nearness to the public road. There was a small room off the kitchen where we took our baths. The boiler here had to be refilled, like the one at the other house; but this plan saved carrying the water upstairs: the little drawback being that tramps, pedlars, and tinkers had a disconcerting habit of appearing at the door very early in the morning.

Our apple-cheeked one withdrew her presence about half-past seven, and when we came down to the bathroom at eight, we often found the front door open. Then a tinker's cart, loaded up with children, tin cans, stag's antlers, and heather brooms, would stop at the gate. Before you had time to protest the tinkers would be 'yammering' in their well-known, low-pitched, whining voices "inside the door"—not that a tinker wife would have blenched at the sight of a

lady in a kimono or a fur coat over a night-gown, or no coat at all, but we could not welcome her at that early hour.

Our landlady was always welcome. But she did not very often come into the kitchen. She had brought up a large family of children in the little house. It now was empty in winter and let in summer, so she preferred her own corner in the mill.

Looking round the kitchen, she remarked severely that she was "old-fashioned," and didn't hold with modern notions. "When the range came in, I went out," she said. In her own kitchen she had a fine, wide, open fireplace, where a chain with hooks for swinging the porridge pot or the girdle, hung over the fire. Looking from it to the dour black countenance of "the range," we quite sympathized with her. Life is rendered more comfortable, we suppose, by all kinds of modern contrivances. But is it? Was our idealistic shopman perhaps right? Is a

trifle of wasted labour, a little less convenience really discomfort? Is not comfort, after all, a shy bird, not to be caught in every bush? The softest bed won't put you to sleep if you are really wakeful; nor the hardest keep you awake if you are very sleepy. So it is with food; tempting meals are set before a dyspeptic, all in vain, and an active, hungry man enjoys a crust. But it is, of course, the middle state where luxuries really count as such—that horrid condition so common in over-civilized people, when *half* well, *half* hungry, *half* sleepy, but all the same weak and tired and bored, and wanting rest and food and sleep. Then one can wheedle a passing satisfaction from extra comfort which makes it almost necessary. Still, discomfort of a moderate kind is largely a matter of habit. By the time we had moved into our second cottage we had become accustomed to doing without many things that are generally considered essential

to easy living; but we did not work quite so hard this time.

As our stay was going to be short, we allowed the apple-cheeked one to give some extra help: she cleaned the shoes and washed the dusters.

The surrounding walks here were very different, though they could not compare in beauty with those near our first cottage. The choice now lay between the highroad, the moor, or the pine forest. We never chose the highroad, unless we were obliged to go to the village. But just beyond our little bridge the road ran between hayfields. The field above the river was surely one that the Lord had blessed. In August, when the hay was just ripening, it made a wonderful piece of colour; where mats of bluebells and buttercups and deep crimson clover were all caught in a gauzy brown net of flowering grasses.

The river was so uncanny that we never went near it. Always there, yet never in

repose: the colour of an eel—in itself an offence—having swallowed up all the musical little mountain waters, it hurried on under ugly iron bridges to tourist-peopled villages farther down.

The walks in the pine woods were monotonous, quite silent, apparently unending, till you came out suddenly beside one or other of the lochs concealed amongst the trees.

It was by no means easy to hit the right path, or having reached the lochs to find your way back again. After a mile or two the woods grew denser, until the path ran into a bit of dead forest, where the trees had been so tightly squeezed together that thousands were dead from want of air and space, and they stood packed in skeleton ranks, green only at the tops, their bare branches covered with long mosses, like wisps of dry grey hair. However windy the day had been outside, not a breath blew in these stagnant

"The trees stood in a great half-circle, gravely looking at their own reflections in the black mirror."

thickets; even birds and rabbits had forsaken them, only now and then you saw on the pathway, like a deeply-cut intaglio, the pointed footprint of a deer.

Then just as the breathless stillness had become intolerable, and the path appeared unending, there came a glint of something shining between the trees ahead of you, and the path stopped abruptly at the edge of the loch. There was no beach; the water lapped right up to the feet of the trees that stood in a great half-circle (all green again now) gravely looking at their own reflections in the black mirror. Then with dramatic suddenness the forest stopped, and all the lower end of the sheet of water lay open to the light, the moors stretched away in the distance, flat and free, the rosy sky was reflected in the water, and from the marshes at the farther side the invariable heron—that always does flap away in such a scene and will always be described afresh—rose

sullenly from his fishing and hated the intruders.

Life at the Mill Cottage was distinctly less sequestered in several respects than it had been in our former dwelling. The animals here were almost society in themselves; indeed, one of our visitors was apt to waste time in playing with them. We all were particularly anxious to minister to the cow who, poor creature, did fare badly, being occupied in the task of feeding others whilst herself unfed. Her milk was by no means rich, nor very abundant, in spite of the fact that she was eating by 'screich of day' and rarely paused till night fell. She had enough to do, for she supplied our wants; she gave what milk granny and the boy required; she also supported the calf—and all upon an acre or so of mountain wild flowers, and a few nips of dry grass. No invalid recovering from influenza could have been more voracious

than that engaging black velvet calf. But bluebells are wiry, papery feeding, and do not seem to offer much nutrition, so in spite of all the cow's efforts the 'maternal fount,' as the Victorians called it, began to run dry.

One radiant morning, looking out before our own breakfast, I saw the calf standing, with a stunned expression, conscious that his had not been provided. The cow went on stolidly, cropping mouthfuls of scanty grass as if she noticed nothing. Presently the calf sidled up to her, to be received with a thrust of horns and a push that sent him edging away. Again he approached her, with the same result. Then the bright idea occurred to him of applying to the pony for a little nourishment. Her fierce reception evidently chilled and surprised him. He edged away from her too, and finally, with a pitiful gesture, lowered his black velvet head and began to nip at the bluebells for

himself. In two days' time he was feeding alone, with fine independence, on the top of the steep bank, and ignored his patient mother altogether.

"*Oor coo eats rubber,*" was little Peter's startling remark one afternoon. He went on to explain that the cow had nibbled the waterproof cover of the baker's van when it was waiting at the door. She looked over our fence too, at a basin full of green pea-pods, with a deep glare of hunger in her eye that was quite startling. However, as the calf had begun to look out for himself, we were happy to observe that she became gradually less pathetic, even, as time went on, allowing her black velvet one an occasional drink.

The work indoors at the Mill Cottage was very light. Perhaps as we drew near the end of our stay we were not so feverishly active as we had been to begin with, when the whole thing was fresh, for the zeal of new brooms is tremendous. More probably

we had become used to the daily routine, and now felt that we were able to meet any ordinary little household emergency. These recollections are only of value, as showing that life without servants can be not only tolerably comfortable, but as happy as the day is long. Of course we were new to it, and novelty has charms. The two months and a half were a short spell of work. The place was lovely, the air reviving, and we had nothing else to distract our attention. Also there were three of us (sometimes four) at work in a tiny house, and we had assistance with the stove in the mornings.

Still, discounting all this, we lacked many of the conditions that make work easy. We had no shops at hand, and none of us had much knowledge when we began. To sum up, we may, perhaps, be allowed to add a few crumbs from our personal experience—every one must differ as to methods. These are only hints which may possibly be of use to any one

trying a like experiment. We give them for what they are worth.

1st. If at all possible, engage some one to light and clean the kitchen stove every morning.

2nd. Don't rise too early.

3rd. Don't do any hard work before breakfast.

4th. Resolve to have *no* make-shift meals.

5th. Take a long rest after dinner.

6th. *Eat in the kitchen.*

This last rule we consider the secret of comfort in a cottage. A good many of the above axioms sound very like Mr. Punch's celebrated advice to those about to marry. But they do not mean "don't work"—only don't do work at unaccustomed hours. Keep your strength as much as possible, so as to have a reserve, thus escaping the dread sensation of being unable to take another step or stand for another moment. When there is no one else to fall back upon, it is

always well to keep a little energy in reserve, for a call may come upon it when least expected.

We may add what to sensible people seems almost superfluous advice—*i.e.* avoid extra ornaments and dust-traps of all kinds. Also make the last meal as simple as possible, so that it can be cleared away and washed up with little trouble. And try to keep in mind that the things you are accustomed to occupy your time with are, generally, much less amusing, and all-too-often much less necessary than the simple routine of household work!

When the last morning came, and we had to leave the Mill Cottage, it seemed impossible to believe that the greater part of the summer was gone. Time had passed so quickly, cut off as we had been from the usual current of life. We left for an early train, crossing the moor whilst the heather was still hoary with the morning dew and hanks of mist lay

about the edge of the woods. There was a sharpness premonitory of coming frosts, even then in the limpid, heather-scented air. The lady from Portobello had some shrewd evenings before her in October we thought, though we grudged her every remaining day of August and September. Our landlady and the apple-cheeked one and the little boy, the cow and the calf and the pony, were grouped at the doors as we left. We wondered what the little home would be like in winter—the snow wreaths were still unmelted on the higher mountains, and the first storms begin early in these parts. Not even the thought of the low rooms warm with fires of peat and pine sticks: the owls hooting through the resonant night in a hard frost, and the moon shining on the white hills, would have tempted us to try a winter there. Better for the spirits, if not for the soul, to mingle again with the jostling interests, boredoms, vulgarities even, of life in populous

places; and try if necessary, to simplify it where one was still in touch with other people's worries, and other people's efforts at war economy.

Whether our summer experiment had been of any use or not, we had made the effort; we had gained the experience—

> "Life's joy lies in doing—
> And the act of the pursuing
> Is the prize."

THE END

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