The Observations

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Extract

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I Find a New Place

I had reason to leave Glasgow, this would have been about three four years ago, and I had been on the Great Road about five hours when I seen a track to the left and a sign that said 'Castle Haivers'. Now there's a coincidence I thought to myself, because here was I on my way across Scratchland to have a look at the Edinburgh castle and perhaps get a job there and who knows marry a young nobleman or prince. I was only 15 with a head full of sugar and I had a notion to work in a grand establishment.

Not only that but this lad from the Highlands had fell into step with me the past hour, he would have been about my age and he had been to get a tooth pulled. He kept dragging his lip down to show me the hole. I was sick of this boy and his grin and his questions, fair are you going? fair do you live? fwot is your name? fwould you like to lie down with me? – all this. I had told him a whole clatter of lies hoping he would go away but he was stuck to me like horse dung on a road sweepers shoe. If I slowed down he slowed down, if I sped up he sped up, if I stopped to fix my shawl or shift my bundle, what did he do but stand with his hands in his pockets to watch. Once or twice he got a jack on him would have put your eye out, you could see it poking behind the trousers, and the feet on him were filthy.

I have to admit there was one added factor in my desire to leave the Great Road and that was the pair of polis that was coming towards us on horseback. Big buckers by the look of them. I had spotted them in the distance five minutes back, their top hats and big buttons, and ever since I had been looking for a way off the road, one that didn't involve me running across a field and getting mucked up to the oxters.

So I stopped walking and turned to the Jocky. 'This is where I go off,' I says, pointing at the sign to the castle.

'I fwhill be coming with you,' he says. 'Hand you can be making me dinner. Hand hafterwards fwhee can be making a baby.'

'What a good idea,' says I and when he stepped forward as if to kiss me I grabbed his danglers and give them a twist. 'Make your own babies,' I says. 'Now away and flip yourself.'

Off I went up the lane and when he followed me I gave him a shove and a few more flip offs and stamped on his bare foot and that was the last I seen of him, for a while anyway.

The lane to the castle wound up a slope between two beech hedges. It was September but uncommon warm and lucky for me as I had no coat. After I had been walking about a minute there was the faint thud of hoofs on dirt and I turned to look back at the Great Road. The two grunts trotted past on their way towards Glasgow. Did they even turn their heads, did they buckie. Hurrah, says I to myself and good flipping riddance. What I always say is if you can avoid the scrutiny of the law then why not.

With them out the way I thought I would have a quick skelly at the castle then find somewhere to sleep before it got dark. I had only 6 Parma violets and two shillings to my name and Gob only knew when I would get more, so I could ill afford a room. But I was hoping for a barn or a bothy where I could lay my head a few hours then press on to Edinburgh once it got light.

I had gone no more than two steps when what did I see but a red-haired country girl about my age come skittering round the corner. She wore a dark stuff frock and plaid shawl and she was dragging a box along the ground by means of a leather strap. Even though she was in a queer hurry, she was laughing away to herself like a woman possessed. The most notable thing about her was her skin, very rough and red it was like she had had a go at her phiz with a nutmeg grater. I stepped out her road and gave her good afternoon as she passed. But she just cackled in my face and carried on stumbling towards the Great Road, dragging her box behind her, there was not

much would surprise me then nor now, but all the same you expect more manners from country folk.

The lane in front of me dipped right then left through fields, climbed again and after about ten minutes walking it passed the gate of a big mansion house in amongst a scutter of trees. I could see no castle but there was a woman running about the gravel drive and lawn. This way and that she went, waggling her hands in the air and every so often clapping. At first I thought she was gobaloon but then I looked over the wall and seen she was only chasing a pig. It looked like tremendous fun.

'Wait on, missus,' I says, 'I'll give you a hand.'

Did you ever try to catch a pig? It's not as easy as you think. That bucker had us running in circles. He shot round the back of the house to the yard and we followed. I nearly got him the once but he was a slippery old wretch he squirmed out my grasp like he was buttered. I would have dove after him but I did not want to ruin my good frock. Your woman kept shouting instructions to me, 'Quickly!' she goes and 'Watch out!' She was English, I realised. I had met English people before but never an English woman. At last the two of us cornered the pig by the hen run. We chased him along a fence then shooed him back into the sty and your woman slammed the gate shut.

I watched her as she stood there panting a moment or two. She would have been about 27 then. Her back was slender though it looked as though she didn't wear stays. And the colour was high in her cheeks with all the running but you could see by her forehead that her skin was pale as cream, there was not a freckle on her, she was alabaster. The frock she wore was silk, a watery shade, more blue than green, she struck me as being shockingly well dressed for running about after pigs.

In due course she got her breath back. 'Treacherous trollop,' she says through her teeth. For a minute I thought she was talking about the pig until she added, 'If I ever see her again, I'll take her and I'll –' She clenched her fists but did not finish the sentence.

The red-haired girl dragged her box through my minds eye. 'Did somebody do you wrong, missus?' I says.

Your woman looked at me startled, I think she had forgot I was there. 'No,' she says. 'The gate of the sty was left open. Probably an accident.' Then she frowned at me and says, 'What are you exactly?'

This threw me into confusion. 'What am I?' I says. 'Well, I was a – I suppose you could say I was a housekeeper for a –'

'No, no,' she says. 'What I mean is are you a Highlander?'

'Indeed not,' I says most indignant. 'I've never been near the Highlands.' She was still looking at me so I says, 'I was born Irish. But I'm more of the Scottish persuasion now.'

She seemed pleased enough about that. 'Irish,' she says. While we was chasing the pig two or three strands of her hair had fell down and now she gazed at me very thoughtful as she pinned them back up. You could have floated in her eyes they was that wide, and pale green like the sea over sand. At length she says, 'A housekeeper?'

'Yes, missus. For a Mr Levy of Hyndland, near Glasgow.'

'I don't think I ever saw a housekeeper in such bright clothes,' she says. Her mouth gave a twitch, like she might laugh, perhaps the sight of my frock cheered her up. It was a beauty, right enough, bright yellow with little blue buttons and white satin bows at the front, admittedly it was not as clean as when I had set out that morning. There was a smudge at the hem and the lace was ripped this was because the Highland boy had at one stage got me pinned to the ground, I had to near enough wrench his ear off before he let me up.

'I am between places,' I says. 'My Mr Levy he died on me and I am just now on my way to Edinburgh to find another situation.'

'I see,' says your woman. She folded her arms and took a turn around me, studying me from a few different angles. When she came back to face me, she looked doubtful. 'I don't suppose you've ever done any outdoors work?' she says.

'Well, as a matter of fact I have,' I says, and without a word of a lie too, for a good deal of my work was outdoors before I was taken in by my Mr Levy.

Your woman nodded. 'What about cows?' she says.

'What about them?'

'Can you milk a cow?'

'Oh certainly,' I says without hesitation. 'A cow, yes, I can milk a cow, that's no problem at all, I was born milking cows.'

'Good.' She indicated some buildings in the distance. 'We keep a farm over there, the Mains. You can have something to eat and drink and then let's see you milk a cow.'

'Ah well,' says I quick, 'it's a while since I done it now.'

But I don't think she heard me because she didn't reply, just led me across the yard to the pump and give me a tin cup that was hanging on a nail. 'Help yourself,' she says.

I drank two cupfuls. All the while she was watching me with those eyes. I says, 'I might be a bit out of practice with the cows now. I may have lost the knack, I don't know.'

'Are you hungry?' she says.

Gob was I and I tellt her as much. She pointed to a door in the house. 'There's bread in there on the table,' she says. 'Take a slice.'

'That's very kind of you, missus,' I says and did as I was bid.

The kitchen was a fair size but Jesus Murphy was it a shambles. A pail of milk had been overturned and there was lines of oats scattered on the floor and a smashed teapot laying against the skirting board. When I stepped in, a black cat was lapping at the spilled milk but as soon as it seen me it ran out another door with a yowl. I peered about me. The fire was out but there was a terrible scorched smell in the air. At first I wondered was it the runaway pig had made the mess. But when I looked more closely I seen that the oats had been scattered deliberately, in actual fact the lines of them formed four letters of the alphabet to spell a vulgar expression for a ladys private parts, I will not write it here but I thought to myself it would have to have been the very clever pig done that.

There was no sign of any cook or maid, so I cut myself a slice of oat bread from the loaf on the table and ate it and then I cut another one and I started to eat that and while I was eating I cut a 3rd slice

and tucked it down my frock between my two titties. The bread lacked salt but I would have ate the snibs off the windows I was that hungry. As I threw the bread into me, I was wondering how difficult can it be to milk a cow. You grab the dangler bits and pull, for dear sake I had seen it done manys a time as I swanned about on market day only not close at hand. I was a city girl, milk came in a pail and went in your tea, I did not even like milk and now because of my own stupid pride I would have to squeeze it out a cow.

I cut another slice of bread and stashed that in my frock just in case then I went back outside, your woman was where I left her by the pump.

'There you are,' she says. 'I thought you were lost.'

'Oh, no missus, only it was such marvellous bread I didn't want to rush the slice.'

She didn't say anything about that, she just sniffed and turned on her heel. I hared after her. 'That's a tremendous place you have here,' I called out. 'By Jove it is.' But my words fell on deaf ears she did not even turn her head, I had no choice but to follow.

We walked away from the mansion house, up a back lane that led to the farm buildings and from there across a yard and into a big shed. The place was heaving with cows there was about twenty of them which is a lot of cows when you think about it and even when you don't. The stench in there would have knocked you down. There was two milkmaids stood talking up the far end, sisters by the looks of them, all dressed up in the cornthrasher duds they were, the boots and striped aprons. I near enough laughed out loud. To my mind they looked a right pair of bogtrotters but then I was only young and thought that anything in the country was to be looked down upon and mocked. Your woman went and spoke to them and then the two maids turned and stared down the length of the byre at me, their caps was comical but you would not have said their expressions was friendly. I gave them a smile and a wave, neither one of them waved back. The sour phiz on the pair of them, it is an unexplained miracle how the milk did not turn on a daily basis.

All this while, one of the cows was shoving her great behind up onto me until she near enough had me pinned against the wall. I had to juke out the way to save myself from being squashed. Your woman came back towards me holding a bucket.

'What a grand lot of cows you have, missus,' I says to her. She said nothing to that just handed me the bucket. I looked at it. Then I looked at the cows. Then I looked at your woman.

'What is your name?' she says.

'My name is Bessy,' I told her. 'Bessy Buckley.'

'Well then, Bessy, here you are,' she says and she give me a stool and pointed to one of the cows, the one had been squashing me. 'Go ahead.'

To my great relief she did not stay to watch, but went back to talk to the Curdle Twins who had sat themselves down and begun their own work. You could hear the milk firing into their pails like billy-o. I watched them, thinking to myself well gob that looks easy enough and so after a moment I settled on my own stool.

But could I get a drop of milk to appear? Could I flip. I sat there for what felt like an age with a bucket in one hand and a great pink tittie in the other. It wasn't my own tittie, it was the cows and it was that full it was touching the floor. I swear I squeezed till the fingers was dropping off me and the only thing that emerged from the cow came steaming out its hole and would near enough have ruined my good frock if I hadn't skipped out the way. At the end of about 20 minutes, the bucket was still empty.

Your woman came back this time with the Curdle Twins in her wake. She took one look in the bucket and says to me, 'Now then, Bessy, I thought you said you could milk a cow?'

'I lied,' I says, wishing I had never stopped to help with her flipping pig. The Curdle Twins was exchanging glances, very superior in the background, shock almighty, oh she said she could milk a cow but she can't oh she's a liar did you ever hear the like, and all this. My face felt hot. I shot up from the stool. It was my intention to say 'I'd better be off,' and then stride out with my head in the air but I must

have got up too quick, and instead I said, 'Oh flip,' and keeled over in a dead faint. I would have fell in the cowpat if missus hadn't leapt forward and caught me.

How long I was out I haven't a notion but when I came to I had been carried out the byre. I was sat on a stool with my head between my legs and your woman had her hand in the back of my frock, she was loosing my corset. I had a good view down my bodice, there was a load of breadcrumbs in the cleft of my bosom, I had to fold my arms to stop them falling out.

'Keep still now,' your woman says, but kindly. 'You fainted. And no wonder with your stays laced so tight.'

After a while she let me sit up and brought me a tin cup of milk that she got from a bucket. She stood with her hands on her hips watching me. I was full of shame, I sipped at the milk just to please her and as soon as my head cleared I got to my feet. 'I best be going,' I says. 'Sorry, missus.'

She just nodded her head and waved her hand, I was dismissed.

I left the farmyard and went down the lane to the back of the big house. My bundle lay where I'd dropped it, near the hen run. I was about to pick it up when I seen your woman returning. A thought struck me and I called out to her. 'Missus, which way is the castle?'

'Castle?' she says. 'What castle?'

'Only the sign down the road there said there was a castle up this way and I wanted to have a look at it.'

'Ah,' she says and shook her head. 'There is no castle. Castle Haivers is the name of the estate.'

'Oh well,' I says and leaned down to pick up my bundle. 'Not to worry.'

'WAIT!' goes your woman, of a sudden.

Oh sugar, I thought, she's seen the bread in my bosom and I'm in for it. I straightened up. She was staring at me, her head cocked to one side. 'You didn't tell me you could read,' she says.

'Well you never asked,' I says.

'I just assumed. I thought – because –'

She did not say because why but I knew anyway it was me being only an Irish girl, everyone thought the same. Her eyes was gleaming now. 'But can you write?'

'Indeed I can,' I says. 'I write very good.'

'In English?'

I looked at her. 'What else?'

'Oh?' she says. 'And who taught you?'

I thought a second then I says, 'My mother, God rest her soul,' and I blessed myself.

Your woman tilted back a bit offended, I suppose it would have been the sign of the cross bothered her, even the English don't like it.

'Wait here,' she says, and hared away over to the big house.

I stood there looking about me. What next I was asking myself, perhaps she wants me to read something for her or write a letter. After a while she came back with a blotter in one hand and a pen in the other.

'Here you are,' she says. 'Now show me your writing.' She was not going to take me at my word not after the incident with the cow, who could blame her.

I took the pen, it was already dipped in ink. There was a stone base to the pump, I leaned the blotter on it and quickly wrote a few words I think they was *thank you for the bread missus sorry about the duplicity* or something like that. I remember I put *duplicity* because it was a word I had learned off my Mr Levy. I might not be able to milk a cow but I could spell and I was proud of it.

Your woman was watching over my shoulder. I would have wrote more but the ink run out. When I finished I handed her back the pen and blotter. 'Well, well,' she says, and laughs very gay. 'And how old are you, Bessy?'

'18 missus.' Which did not really count as a lie because I was always lying about my age. In any case there was some doubt about when I'd been born, my mother had not a very good memory for dates.

'18?' Your womans eyebrows shot up. Then she says, 'Well, no matter. I can pay you 4 shillings a week and you will have bed and all food provided. Would you like to work for me?'

'Oh dear,' I says. 'Oh no. I'm going to look for work in Edinburgh, missus.'

She laughed. 'But you don't have to go to Edinburgh now,' she says. 'You can stay here and I will look after you and give you 4 and 6 a week.'

'But – I can't really milk a cow, missus.'

'You have other skills,' she says. '5 shillings then, and I will look after you and give you a patch of garden to grow what you will.'

I tellt her she could forget about the patch of garden, the only thing I was interested in growing was rich. Of course there was little chance of that. 5 shillings was a pittance even in them days but I knew my prospects would be the same anywhere else and at least here I was out of the world, all there was in these parts was clodhoppers cows and a few coal pits. And there was something else made her words appealing. *I will look after you.*

I glanced over at the farmhouse. 'Do you have any books in there, missus? I mean story books.'

'Oh yes,' she says. 'Quite a number.'

'I have a fondness for reading,' I says. 'If I could have permission to read the books on occasion –'

'Hmm.' She sighed and walked about a bit and then at length seemed to come to some sort of *very reluctant* decision. 'Very well,' she says. 'Access to books. And 5 shillings a week.'

'Done,' I says, and I can honestly say I thought it a bargain.

She took me into the kitchen then and without making any comment about the smell of burning or the mess she kicked some of the oats about the place so you could no longer read the word they spelt. Then she sat me at the table to explain the full extent of my duties. Well, if you had wrote it down, the list would have been as long as your arm but it all seemed straight forward enough, there was nothing strange or

startling in what she said. Most of the livestock was kept over on the farm and was looked after by farm servants but your woman said she liked to keep a few hens and a pig at the main house, more or less as pets, and I was to feed them. I was to keep the house clean and tidy, wash cook scrub sweep dust shake the mats and make tea. Every day, light all the fires and clean the range and keep it lit. Clean the boots empty the thunder mugs for her and the master. In addition, if they were short-handed, I might have to cart manure and pick stones out a field, then I might have to help put these same stones in holes in another field which, she said, was to make a drain. I'd have to help look after the vegetable garden and if I had any time left over I could always fill it by darning and mending. Generally, I had to do any chore you cared to mention since I was to be what they called the in and out girl, ½ the time I would be in and then the other ½ out. There were farm servants that lived on the farm and in bothies on the other side of the wood but I was the only domestic servant. The one thing she did not mention was the milking. I asked her about that.

'Oh,' she says. 'Don't worry about that for now. Jessie and Muriel will see to the cows. You would only have to help them out it in case of an emergency.'

That tickled me. Now what would be the emergency, I wondered. I got a picture in my head of everyone running around in a panic falling over each other to get the cows milked. Wash the pots, Bessy! Make a drain! I can't missus I have to milk the cows it's an emergency!

Your woman was looking at me. 'Don't tell me you are a daydreamer,' she says.

'Oh no, missus.'

'But perhaps you are lazy? Or bad-tempered?'

I shook my head. 'No indeed.'

She says, 'Are you, let me see – dishonest?'

She had me there, because of the cows. But I wasn't going to admit to it. 'No missus I am not,' I says. 'Not in the usual course of things.'

Your woman didn't look convinced. 'Now then, Bessy,' she says. 'Tell the truth and shame the Devil.'

My mother was forever telling me I wouldn't know the truth if it flew up my skirt and said 'How do you do.'

I says, 'Honest to Gob, missus, I'm not a liar.' And would have spat to swear my word except we was inside, so I just did three small pretend spits over my shoulder. Your woman looked appalled, I don't know why she was bothered, the place was a shambles.

'Bessy,' she says, 'I don't know what you have been taught, but don't *ever* do that in this house again.'

'Sorry, missus. But missus I only said that about the cows because I wanted you to think well of me.'

She sighed and then says very patient, 'Bessy dear, what did you call the lady where you last worked?'

'Nothing at all,' I says.

She looked at me.

'The reason being there was no missus, it was just my Mr Levy. He was an old bachelor gentleman and it was just me and one boy looked after him, missus.'

'Oh,' she says and frowned a moment. 'But I'm sure you called Mr Levy Master or Sir, did you not?'

'Well yes, I suppose I did.' I says that because it was what she wanted to hear. 'Master, that's what he liked to be called. Master this and Master that.'

'Bessy,' she says now very solemn. 'I would like you to call me *marm*.'

'Certainly I will. Whatever you like, marm.'

She smiled at me and nodded. 'That's better,' she says. She took a deep breath. 'Now Bessy,' she says. 'There is one other task that I want you to do for me.' And the way she made her eyes bulge out when she said it I knew it was the most important thing.

She crossed over to a tallboy and took an accompt book out the cupboard. Jesus Murphy, I thought, she wants me to do the accompts, she's got the wrong girl there for I might be able to write

but I have never had a head for figures. But I was wrong.

'This book is yours,' she says and pressed it into my hands. 'Now Bessy, listen carefully. I will see to it that you are taught everything you need to know about the work about the house. But in return, every night, I want you to take the time to write down what you have done in this book, from the moment you get up until the moment you go to bed, leaving nothing out.'

I just looked at her. 'But what for missus?' I says, a bit nonplussed. 'Marm.'

She didn't even blink. 'Because it is what I wish,' she says. 'And be aware, it is the main condition of your employment. Don't think I would take you on if you couldn't write. It would not be worth my while to train you otherwise since it's clear you know nothing of this kind of work.'

Ever since I had scribbled those few words on the blotter she had seemed very excited. Even now there was a kind of a gleam in her eye and she was breathing heavy. I shivered, for the light was going and it was getting cold.

She says, 'I will take a look at what you have written from time to time. And when you have filled this book I will provide you with another. Is that understood?'

'Yes, miss – I mean marm.'

I stared at the book, it had a brown cover made of board and a lot of pages inside with lines on them where you could add up the totals of your purchases. I don't know how many pages perhaps a hundred in all. I could never imagine writing enough to fill it not in a million years. She handed me the pen I had used outside and then she says, 'You will need ink, just a moment,' and hurried out the room, the hem of her skirt trailing oats into the passage.

While she was gone, I glanced at the grate wondering did she ever in gobs name light the fire. It was then I seen the reason for the charred smell in the air. I don't know why but it made me shiver again. For laying among the ashes was an accompt book the exact same as the one I had been given. The only difference being that the

book in the grate was burnt so bad that only the binding and a few pieces of its scorched cover remained. I took a candle and peered down at the hearth to have a better look. Up close I could see that all the pages had been ripped out and was now just wispy ashes in the grate. The cover was damp, as though someone had poured water on it to douse the flames. I flipped it open. Inside there was an inscription in a childs hand, the words was ½ scorched but you could still read 'belongs to Morag Sutherland' and a date in July but no year was given. Who was this child Morag, I wondered and why was her book burnt? I was about to lift it out the grate when I heard your woman coming back down the passage, so I stood up.

'Here we are!' she says, as she came back in. 'Now, hold out your hands, Bessy,' she says and I did as I was bid. Then she presented me with a bottle of ink and a spare pen, the way she done it with such ceremony for dear sake you would have thought she was giving you a prize.

And then, true to her word she did give me something to read, it was called *Bleak House*, I hoped it wasn't an omen. She showed me a label she had pasted inside, a black and white label, it had a picture of two ladies sat under a tree looking at an open book. Around the edge were the words EX~BIBLIOTHEC~CASTEL~HAIVERS. Every one of her books had that same label, she seemed to think it would stop them being stolen.

After that, she showed me where I was to sleep. She give me a candle and took one herself then led me out the kitchen into the hall. It was a drafty old house and the flickering light threw great shadows to dance against the walls, I had a glimpse of a hallstand and grandmother clock and then the banisters loomed as we turned up the stairs.

Up we went, along the main landing where all the doors was shut so you could not see into the rooms. I was a bit sad about that, I would have liked a look around. At the end of another narrower passageway we climbed a short flight of stairs to a little attic room with a sloping roof and skylight window. There was just enough space to

fit a bed, a chair and a small cupboard, no more than that and certainly not two people which is why the missus stood outside, her candle held aloft for me to see my new domain. You could have took it in with one eye shut.

'This will be where you sleep,' she says.

'Very nice,' says I.

The bed was not even made and there was no curtain or cloth at the window. I was trying not to think of my own lovely room at Mr Levys in Crown House with the white marble mantelpiece, velvet drapes and all. That was the past, I would never see it again.

'For the time being I will eat my meals with you in the kitchen,' your woman says, like it were to be a great treat for the both of us. 'But of course,' she says, 'when my husband returns home, he and I will dine together and you will wait on us.'

'Oh of course,' I says. 'When will he be coming home, missus?'

But she didn't answer that, she just smiled at me and says, 'What time did you start work in your last place?'

I took a guess. '8 o'clock?'

'Ah,' she says, 'I'm afraid you will find us early risers here in the country. Tomorrow, you should have the fires lit and breakfast made by 6.'

So there I was with two pens, my two titties, Charles Dickens, two slice of bread and a blank book at the end of my first day in the middle of nowhere. Except as it turned out it wasn't quite the end.

Before I went to bed I had to clear up the kitchen, all except the hearth which your woman tellt me not to touch. She went up to her room and left me to it. The cleaning took forever because I was not used to such work and I did not get up the stairs until after 11 o'clock. I was too tired to unpack my things so I simply pulled my nightdress out my bundle and left the rest until such times as I had a moment. I wrapped the two piece of bread I had took from the kitchen in a clean shift and hid them in the cupboard, and I ate the 6 Parma violets that were in my pocket. Then I made up the bed and

got into it. The mattress was hard but not lumpy and the blankets seemed clean enough. The clouds must have been thick that night for there was not a star in the sky. I lay there very alert for hours the reason being I would have to start my chores at 5 and I was terrified I would not get up in time. At length however I must have dozed off. I had been asleep what seemed only a few minutes when something made me wake with a start. My eyes snapped open. Your woman was standing over me with a candle, dressed in her nightclothes. She was raging, full of fury, her face so tight it looked like it might fly apart at any moment.

'Get up!' she hissed. 'Get up this instant!' She dragged back the blankets and hit the mattress a few times with her fist. 'I want to see you downstairs, girl,' she says. 'Two minutes. Don't get dressed, just come down immediately.'

And then she was gone.

Jesus Murphy my heart was going like the hammers of Hell, when I lit my candle I could see the thump of it behind the bodice of my nightdress. My first reaction was, I had slept in. I glanced out the window, it was still pitch black out there not even a hint of the dawn, it could have been ½ past 5 or 6 or even 8 for all I knew, I was not an early riser. My hands shook as I pulled on my shawl, I was not sure if it was the cold or the fright. In my bare feet I crept downstairs to the hall. Well the grandmother clock said it was 10 past two so I had not slept in. And then it came to me, why your woman was angry. She had examined the oat bread and seen that I had took more than one slice. I was thinking to myself, now you're in for it and you'll be back on the road in the morning with no job and not even a character and two boxed ears because you're a liar and a thief and you never milked a cow in your life.

It was with a heavy heart that I pushed open the kitchen door and stepped in. Your woman was sat at the table in the light of a lamp and two candles. She no longer seemed angry but she had a distant air about her, she didn't even look at me, just gazed at the wall. 'Come in please,' she says her voice kind of flat.

I shuffled forward a few steps. 'I'm sorry, marm.'

Her head shot round. 'Whatever for?'

'For the –' I hesitated, perhaps she hadn't noticed the bread after all and it was something else bothered her. So I says, 'For whatever I done that made you angry with me.'

'Angry?' she says. 'I am not angry.' She give me a big smile and then she turned her face to the wall and spoke again in the flat voice. 'There is cocoa on the shelf,' she says. 'And milk in that jug. I want you to make a cup of cocoa please.'

'C-cocoa, marm?'

'Yes thank you,' she says. 'I want you to make a cup of cocoa please.'

This change of mood and the please and thank you business and the flat voice was most perplexing. I wondered to myself was all mistresses like this, for I had nothing to compare her with except perhaps my mother. Right enough my mothers mood was changeable and she would think nothing of dragging you out of bed in the middle of the night but it wouldn't have been with the aim of getting you to make her a cup of cocoa that's for flipping sure, more about which I may write later.

'Very good, marm,' I says to your woman and I give her a curtsey, I don't know why for I was not in the habit of curtseying to anyone but it just happened that way, it seemed a maid-like thing to do. Then I took the jug from the table and started to warm the milk. Of course I did not know then what I was to find out in the weeks to come and so thought it strange that although she watched what I did she did not direct me once. Not a comment passed her lips, she only followed every move I made, her eyes gleaming in the lamplight like a cats. There was not much to do while the milk warmed but I got the impression she would not like me to sit down so I took a cloth and pretended to wipe the shelves.

After a bit, she took a breath and says, 'What did you do just then? A moment ago?'

'How do you mean miss – marm?'

She pointed to where I had been standing when I came into the room. 'You did something, while you were standing there.'

'A curtsey,' I says. 'Yes marm.' Oh flip, I was thinking to myself, perhaps you shouldn't have done a curtsey for dear sake can you do nothing right.

'Why did you do that?' she asked.

'I don't know, marm. It just came to me.'

'I see,' she says and blinked a few times, I honest to gob thought she was going to cry and then I realised she was looking like she might burst with joy. 'Carry on please,' she says eventually and waved her hand in the direction of the cocoa jar.

Well I turned around and took a cup off the shelf and mixed the cocoa with a little cold milk and then I poured the hot milk on top and give it a good stir. When it was done I took it over to the table and set it down in front of her with the sugar. Of a sudden she leaned forward and clasped my hands between the two of hers, for dear sake the smile she had on her it's a wonder her face didn't crack.

'Thank you, Bessy,' she says. 'You are an extremely good girl. Well done. *Well* done.'

'Don't mention it,' I says.

Her skin felt cool against my fingers, I went to pull away but she held onto me giving both me and the cup fond glances.

'This looks lovely,' she says. 'Absolutely *lovely*. It's perfect in every way and you made it so quickly and with such efficiency. I'm proud of you, Bessy, very proud of you. What a good girl you are! Thank you thank you *thank* you.'

Jesus Murphy it was only a cup of cocoa.

'Very good, marm.' I didn't know where to put myself. 'Will there be anything else?'

'Yes,' she says, suddenly grave. 'There is something.'

What next, I thought, she is mad as a cuckoo. And then she let go my hands which was a relief and surged to her feet.

'Sit down in my place, dear,' she told me, and I did as I was bid. Then she slid the cup of cocoa towards me.

'You have made such a good job of this,' she says. 'I want you to drink it.'

I looked at the cup. Then I looked at her.

'Me, marm?'

'Yes,' she says and then a bit concerned, 'You do like cocoa?'

'Well,' I says. 'I'm not overfond of milk but I don't *mind* cocoa.'

'Good,' she says. 'Now drink it up like a good girl and then get to bed, you'll want to be fresh for the morning.'

She reached out quick towards my face and I flinched, but she only smiled and give my cheek a little stroke with the back of her hand. Then she turned out the lamp, lifted one of the candles and left the room without another word. I was not at all sleepy. If I remember rightly it was a while before I went to bed. I think I sat there all alone for a long time with the cocoa in front of me, watching the steam rise up off it and get sucked towards the candle flame.