

WOMEN WHO WORK.

THE COMPANION.



“ONLY Miss Green, my companion. —Shut the door behind you, Miss Green.”

That is how I was introduced and dismissed an hour or two ago; but all the same, I am not Miss Green, though I am a companion, and I mentioned as much to Mrs.

Pennathort when she engaged me; to which she said, “Green? Oh! Ah! Yes,” and stuck to “Green” in spite of remonstrance ever since.

“It’s much more suitable,” she says, “and it’s easier to recollect.”

I dare say she is right.

“Women who Work!” Well, I’ve seen the words stuck up in big red letters on hoardings and dead walls every time I’ve taken the dogs out during the last three months; and I certainly think we ought to be included in the list; for companionship is work, and hard work sometimes, and one which none but women undertake as a profession. Not that it is very laborious, or painful, or ill-paid. Please don’t think that.

Of course there are disagreeabilities, but where is the trade or profession, from that of a bishop to a costermonger, which has not its drawbacks and pin-pricks—its something unpleasant to do in return for benefits received? A companion is a dependent. Yes, but dependence is not necessarily degrading; and even servile work does not entail servility. “Only Miss Green!” Well, that does not sound pleasantly, I allow; but Miss Green can be as good a lady as Miss Gwyn, and it is “only” Mrs. Pennathort who thinks otherwise.

I never meant to be a companion. Oh dear, no! I was the youngest at home, father’s pet, and the boys’ playmate; but when he died, and George went to Australia, and Tom to the Clergy Orphan School, there was nothing left for me but to live with my married sister, or do something for myself. Now, I didn’t think it was fair to do the first, and I’ll tell you why. Fanny’s husband is a country clergyman, not at all well off, and they’ve got five little ones. Maggie, our second, almost lived there already. She was too delicate to go among strangers, and invaluable to

Fanny, both in teaching the children and in parish duties; so that there was really nothing for me to do, except feel myself a burden on loving hearts; for twenty pounds a year may dress a young woman even now-a-days, but it won’t board her into the bargain, let her have never so small an appetite.

No, that was out of the question; so when I had quite convinced them that I *would* go out, Fred (Fanny’s husband) promised to find me a situation as governess, and began to talk of one he knew. The only question was, did I know enough for it? and when we came to talk it over, it grew alarmingly clear to me that, so far from knowing enough to teach those children, I knew so little of anything that I rather wanted to be taught myself. I could sing and play a little, and possessed enough general knowledge to be useful at home, and a pleasant member of society, but decidedly not enough to entitle me to undertake anything but a nursery governess-ship at best.

“And children are expected to learn so much now-a-days,” said Fanny.

“I shouldn’t like Kate to be a nursery governess,” said Maggie. “It is little better than being an upper nurse, and little more considered.”

“I’m very sorry,” added Fred, “for Kate ought to have a superior sort of situation, if she takes one at all. She is so cheerful and intelligent—such a particularly pleasant companion, that I never dreamed of doubting her capabilities.”

“Perhaps my capabilities all lie in the direction of a companion,” I suggested laughing. “We never thought of that. Suppose I try it.”

“A companion!” said Fanny distastefully.

“I’ve been father’s for six years,” said I.

“They are not paid much better than nursery governesses,” remarked Maggie, “and it must be so trying.”

“There is none of the responsibility of teaching, and any one *more* trying than poor Aunt Paul, with whom I spent six months, and who liked me, couldn’t exist,” said I stoutly. “Fred, sit down and advertise, and don’t forget to say how nice you think I am.”

And I suppose he did put it well, for the advertisement was answered promptly, and before the end of the month I had left the Vicarage, and become a companion.

And now to give a brief sketch of my different situations, and the “trying” elements therein, that others may see what they are, and be warned or cheered thereby. Some people see everything *couleur de rose*, others everything *en gris*. I generally find the truth lies somewhere between.

I got thirty pounds a year in my first situation, which was with the widow of a City knight. I had thought my principal duties would be reading aloud, writing notes, walking out with the old lady, mending her gloves, &c., and playing or singing to her; but

Lady Wiggins had no soul for music or literature either. The piano was never once opened during my stay; and the only reading aloud I was permitted was a daily chapter in the Bible, and the police reports!

Day after day I waded through the long list of horrors and brutalities with which some of the lower

suites her, and I hardly liked to remonstrate. Writing notes I certainly had to do, my employer's spelling being of the lamest; but walking out was not one of her weaknesses. She did drive now and then (I with her) to drink tea, or enjoy a gossip with a congenial acquaintance; but for the most part she preferred sitting in a very stuffy room over a very hot fire, doing



"BURNING OUT THE LAST END OF CANDLE OVER THE MOURNING" (p. 251).

penny papers are crammed to repletion, and the details of which Lady Wiggins used to swallow with an avidity that seemed intensified by the remembrance of equal or worse atrocities, which each seemed to suggest to her, until I left off with a feeling of having passed an hour or two in an Australian slaughter-house, and my sleep used to be haunted by horrible nightmares that left me feverish and unrefreshed in the morning; but it was for Lady Wiggins, not her companion, to choose the literature which

nothing herself, and not allowing me to do anything either but talk, talk the idlest gossip; or sit still and silent while she dozed. On my word, I would sometimes have changed places with the charwoman who came in to scrub; and both my health and spirits suffered so much from the confinement and uncongeniality combined, that at the end of the year Fred insisted I should resign my situation.

My next employer was a single lady of high birth and limited purse. Here I received twenty pounds

a year—never saw a penny paper, or heard a word or letter misplaced. Also I was not made an equal, as with Lady Wiggins, who shed tears at parting with me; and I found the culinary arrangements on such a limited scale that I soon became alarmingly slender. Miss Cholmondely was not only economical, but selfish, and having little appetite herself, chose to consider that a companion must necessarily have less; for which reason she only indulged in minute dishes of a *recherché* character—she partaking first, while I read aloud to her, and I consuming the residue afterwards. In fact, she considered a companion very much as an upper lady's-maid, and treated me as such.

I even made her dresses and did her hair on occasions, and read aloud whenever not otherwise employed. Indeed, Miss Cholmondely never contemplated for a moment the idea that a companion could expect to have even the smallest modicum of time to herself.

Still, hard as the work was, I did not mind that. Work is good for every one; and I was young and strong, with one dear object for energy and economy always before my heart to stimulate my efforts; and captains' biscuits are not very expensive articles, even if you are obliged to buy them for yourself, to stave off pangs of hunger. What tried me was the poor lady's own disposition. Besides her selfishness, she was cursed with one of those evil-thinking, suspicious natures, which seem to rankle everywhere, and which had prevented her from ever finding a home with one of her own relations. She believed nothing and nobody; and to a high-spirited, honourable girl, utterly unused to even a shadow of distrust, it seemed almost insupportable to have every word doubted, or received under protest. If she sent me to one of her drawers for anything, it was with repeated injunctions not to touch anything else; and if the thing were not found in the first moment, she would creep after me, cat-like, to see what I was about. If a visitor said a civil word to me, she accused me of "making up" to them. If the endeavour to get nice things for nominal prices delayed my marketing longer than she thought necessary, she made up her mind that I had got a lover in the neighbourhood, and was gone for a walk with him. (Poor fellow! my lover was in London, so I in Cheltenham had not much chance for walks with him.) But Miss Cholmondely thought "servants and companions, and those sort of people, managed to find sweethearts everywhere;" and she used to crane her neck far out between the curtains of her bed-room window, in the hope of one day discovering us in the act of taking a tender parting. Then she had ways of her own, which she thought subtle, but which were only too painfully transparent, for proving the truth or falsehood of what I said; and as to the accounts, they were such a misery to me that I once exclaimed, with tears in my eyes—

"Oh! Miss Cholmondely—don't give me the money to lay out, if you think I *could* use it for my own purposes. Surely, surely it would be better to keep everything under lock and key, and so put it out of

my power to rob you, than insult me by these suspicions every time you send me on a message!"

"*Qui s'excuse s'accuse,*" said Miss Cholmondely drily. "Pray, Miss Gwyn, remember your place, and do not give way to these outbreaks. I know only too well what you girls are when left to yourself, to be imposed on by tears and romance."

This was "trying;" but I was not the only sufferer. Indeed, I may say I suffered more vicariously than on my own account; for Miss Cholmondely lived in lodgings (not being able to afford a house of her own), and I was the daily medium of accusations conveyed to the indignant landlady, or weeping servant, either of whom was impartially suspected as guilty of the numerous thefts (*i.e.*, articles mislaid by Miss Cholmondely, and generally found in her own possession) which she was in the habit of finding out. I think during the four years I lived with Miss Cholmondely we were obliged to change our apartments seven times; and it was hard to say which was more hated by the various landladies and servants—the lady who originated the suspicions she was too well-bred to convey to them personally, or the companion she made her instrument for so doing.

Well, I had made up my mind to endure all and say nothing, least of all to the loved ones who would have snatched me away at once, had they known of what I had to endure; and I held to my resolutions; but oh! I was glad when Miss Cholmondely told me she would dispense with my services at the end of the quarter, as she was sick of apartments, and meant to try a boarding-house at Brighton, where she would have companionship enough.

"It will be a saving, too," she said; "not that I think you more greedy and wasteful than other girls; but still, money goes in such a very extraordinary—However, I shall be sorry to lose you for some things; for I believe you are a well-principled young woman, and try to do your duty."

I had never heard her say even so much of any living creature before.

My next was a very different situation. I went to it in answer to an advertisement—"A widow lady wanting a companion; must be young, musical, and of a cheerful disposition. No salary, but all the comforts of a refined home, and to be treated in every respect as a daughter."

The "no salary" sounded like a prohibition; but the first sight of the lady swept it away, and the first sound of her voice decided me. She was simply one of the most fascinating women I ever saw; and my life with her seemed like Paradise after Lady Wiggins and Miss Cholmondely. She was comfortably off, and quite alone; her son being at Cambridge, and her only daughter married; and most assuredly she kept her promise of treating me as a child. Indeed, she took a liking to me at once, and told me so; seldom speaking of me except as "my dear little companion," or "my dear young friend." She called me Katie, made me sit on a stool beside her and read to her, while she stroked my hair. She gave me pretty presents, and exacted fewer duties from me than many

guests render to their hostess. Nothing could be more charming while it lasted.

The pity was that *that* was for so short a time. The son came home for the Long Vacation, and—There! you can guess the rest. His mother had raved about me till I suppose he was predisposed to fall in love with me; and he did so.

Then it all changed. It mattered nothing that I did not care for him—that all my heart was away with poor Henry in his London office—that I told her we were only not formally engaged lest it should hamper him—dear fellow! She could not believe that a poor City clerk, whom I owned I had not seen for two years, could rival her handsome, wealthy, idolised son; and she would as little trust my fidelity as that son's generosity or obedience. The latter would indeed have proved but a rotten reed to lean on; and not the least grudge I owe that young man for his persecution is his having turned me from a home where I had been so happy, and from which I parted with tears and bitterness, and the consciousness that even the servants believed that "Miss Gwyn had got up a love affair with the young master."

The married daughter received me till I could get another situation. There was typhus fever at the Vicarage, so I could not go back there; and she was not on good terms with her brother, and thought me hardly treated. I had plenty to do there, for she was living in a whirl of society, and might almost have kept a secretary to write and answer her notes alone. She was kind, and even familiar to me, and took me about with her to opera, concert, and show, whenever (which was nearly always) her husband could not accompany her. When she did not go out she entertained, and we were seldom in bed before the small hours; while I had to be up early, so as to get matters in hand for the day. Also, I was expected to dress, not only well, but stylishly; and, alas! now, for the first time, I got into debt, and discovered how short is the tether of twenty pounds when you try to go beyond neatness and embrace fashion. For I got no salary here either; and young Mrs. Gervase was not a woman to trouble herself with the small economies and anxieties of other people. She liked those about her to be lively, well dressed, and always at her service; and, feeling that she was doing me a kindness in having me, she would have been astonished beyond measure had I hinted at any consideration beyond that which I received. Neither could I have done so; and I let myself be swept along by the whirl, worried and anxious at heart, but too busy for much thought, till one day a black-bordered letter arrived for me. Fanny was dead! The fever she had nursed her husband through had carried her off; and the five motherless children were left to Maggie's care.

"I am only thankful you are in so good a home," she wrote me. "Keep it, for all our sakes, if you possibly can."

Ah! how I cried! Mrs. Gervase's notes were blotted, and there were stains on her embroidery, and false notes on the piano, from the grief which would make tears fall and fingers tremble over my duties.

But it was the very height of the season; the house was full of people; and after she had stood it for two days, I had a hint through her maid that she had *such* a dislike to gloom and depression, and, with so much to do and see about, would I try to be cheerful? I did. I worked harder than ever; went out, laughed, sang, and talked as desired; and sat up at night in my own room, burning out the last end of candle over the mourning I could hardly see through tears, and which I could not afford to send out to be made. It was still fresh, when her brother made up his quarrel with her, and came to the house. The old story began again, and I left of my own accord.

My present employer is a literary lady, and here I have been three years. I am paid fifty pounds a year, am kept strictly in my place as a paid employée, and always retire to my own room when she has visitors. I copy MSS. the greater part of the day, read up books of reference for her use, read aloud, wash the poodle, and take it and Yap, the bull-terrier, out walking; and am often up to a late hour writing or studying for my mistress, after we have finished her evening game of cribbage. It is an active life, but pleasant enough; and Mrs. Pennathort, though brusque and dictatorial, is not unkind. The principal drawbacks are two, her deafness and her dogs. All the reading and information she requires has to be fairly shouted in her ears, and even strong lungs suffer somewhat in the ordeal; but the dogs are worse. Wigs, the poodle, has to be lifted over every puddle, lest he should soil his coat, carried whenever he is tired, and nursed whenever he is cross. He suffers from a concatenation of disorders, proceeding chiefly from over-eating, which make him a most unpleasant companion, and through which I am expected to nurse and doctor him. Woe betide me if I neglect the office! Yap is a vicious, dangerous little brute, that flies at every dog and child he meets, tugs wildly at the end of the chain by which I lead him, and has already bitten me twice, and torn three of my dresses.

These, however, are minor trials, and they will soon be over; for next year—yes, only eleven months more—our long waiting will come to an end, and I and Harry will start a little home of our own. Perhaps the six years' probation will not make it a less happy or contented one.

I have just tried to show you a little of the life that a companion leads, and the trials she has to face; but if both are taken bravely, and in a cheerful spirit, I do not think it is a harder life than others. Sturdy self-respect, high principle, and a sunny disposition are, indeed, absolutely necessary to make it a happy or a successful one; but these will carry you through; and I can hardly look on my career as a total failure, since Miss Cholmondely writes, offering to return to apartments if I will return to her; Mrs. Gervase and her mother treat me (since the son's marriage) as a dear and valued friend, and continually press me to visit them; and poor Lady Wiggins wept with joy, when I met her the other day, at the remembrance of "our happy time together."