Poet and Scullery−Maid

Dorothy Canfield

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ONCE upon a time there was a little scullery−maid, who, like all scullery−maids, spent most of her time in a kitchen. It was the kitchen of a boarding−house, and you can imagine what a disagreeable place it was — full of unpleasant smells, and usually piled high with dirty dishes which the scullery−maid must wash. It was dark, it was greasy, the cook had a bad temper, and the chimney smoked.

You would have thought the little scullery−maid would have been glad to get out of it the instant her work was done, even though the only place to which she could go was one corner of an attic on the top floor. But, oddly enough, she often left her attic room and slipped back down to the kitchen after every one had gone.

For, much as she hated the kitchen, there was one thing about it she loved. It overhung a rippling little river, which ran down from the mountains above the city, and which was always talking to itself and to any one else who would listen. All day long it talked, but then its voice was drowned in the rattle of pots and pans and the angry commands of the bad−tempered cook. The scullery−maid sometimes went out on a little platform, directly over the water, where she sat and peeled a mountain of potatoes. There she could hear the river much more plainly; and she was always deeply disappointed when the cook decided to have the potatoes boiled in their jackets, for on those days she had no opportunity to hear even for a moment the singing voice of the clear stream.

But at night — that was the time! The kitchen was quiet then, and although the door to the platform was locked, she could put her head out of the window and see and hear the dear little river almost as if she were floating on its surface in a boat. She came to know every one of its moods, and how it looked and how it sang in fair weather and in foul. Sometimes it was as merry as a child, and went along laughing and chuckling to itself till a smile came on the scullery−maid's dirty face in answer. Sometimes, on dark nights, it whispered something mournful and yet so sweet that she felt her heart swell. On moonlight nights it glided smoothly along like a moonbeam, with only a gentle lapping where it passed the pillars of the platform, and a low, happy murmur from the other bank.

But under the stars it was the best of all. Then it sang so gallant and heartening a song that the little scullery−maid forgot how she hated the kitchen and the greasy dishes, forgot that she had no friends and no sweetheart. She only felt glad that she was alive, and faced bravely a long future of bad−tempered cooks and unpleasant smells.

Now one of the people who lived in the boarding−house was a poet — a really, truly poet, although people did not know it yet, for he was only a young man and looked like any one else, except that he often forgot to shave himself. One evening he was invited out to a fashionable late supper — a great event with him, for he was very poor. When he dressed, he noticed that as usual he had not shaved for two or three days, so that a blond stubble bristled all over his cheeks and chin. It was too late to ring for anything, so he took his little pitcher and went downstairs to the kitchen to get some warm water.

He had very old slippers on his feet, and they were so worn and soft that they made no noise as he walked; so that the little scullery−maid, leaning out of the window, did not hear him, any more than he saw her in the dark room. As he dipped his pitcher in the reservoir of water, he caught his sleeve on a pan and it came crashing down on the stove. It was a question which was more startled, the girl or the poet. They stood and stared at each other in the dusk. He saw a very dirty little maid with a plain face and no figure at all, and she saw a very handsome young man, for it was so dark that she could not see that he needed to shave.

"Who in the world are you?" asked the poet.

"I am the scullery−maid," she said.

"Good heavens, do you have to stay in this awful place at night as well as by day?"

The poet was like other poets, and could not bear to think of unpleasant things, although he was glad enough to be benefited by their results.

"No, I don't have to stay here."

"Why under the sun do you come back, then?"

Now the scullery−maid was very ignorant and simple−minded — you can imagine how much so from the fact that she could not think of anything to say but the truth.

"I come back to listen to the river," she said.

The poet stared.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

"I do not know exactly why. I — I like it."

There was a long silence, in which the poet heard the gallant song of the little river rushing past under the stars, hurrying along it knew not whither, but still happy and sure that its path was safe. Tears came into his eyes, and he set the pitcher of hot water down on the stove. He had a sudden realization of what the voice of the stream meant to the ugly little scullery−maid. After the manner of poets, he knew at once, much better than she did, what it said to her. He felt a whole poem chanting in his heart.

"You poor child!" he said, and laid his hand on her shoulder. His voice was very soft. Nobody else had ever spoken to her so before. "You poor child! I know why you like to hear it."

And with that he went up−stairs and wrote the loveliest poem you can imagine — all about the little scullery−maid, and how she hated the kitchen, and her ugly, unhappy life, and yet how sweetly the little river sang to her and told her to be brave. The tears were in his eyes many times as he wrote, and he forgot all about the supper to which he had been invited, for he was a real poet.

The scullery−maid stood still exactly where he had left her. For once she did not hear the voice of the river. She heard some one saying, "You poor child! You poor child!" It seemed to her she must have dreamed it, and yet there was the pot of hot water, glimmering white in the dusk. There it was in the morning, too, although of course the water had grown cold.

The poet sent the poem he had written in the night to a great editor — one who had refused every single thing the poet had written before. The editor was as bad−tempered as he was great, but he wiped his eyes after he had read the poem about the dirty little scullery−maid and the song of the river, and sent for the poet at once, to tell him to write more like it. This the poet was already doing. He had forgotten everything else, and imagined that he too was a maid and lived in a greasy kitchen with only the sound of a river for comfort.

For that is the way with a poet. If he gets interested in somebody's point of view, he steps in and pushes the owner out of the way and lives his life for a while. The scullery−maid below stairs did not know that the blond young man on the fourth floor was washing her dishes, peeling her potatoes, and dreading with her the harsh voice of the cook; but so he was. In the evening he stood beside her as she listened to the song of the river; and he stole her simple, ignorant thoughts, one by one, and carried away on the tip of his pen the love for the little stream which filled her heart.

When he had taken them all, and written them down so beautifully that he made himself cry many times, he put them all in a book. Then he forgot about them and fell to imagining he was some one else. For that is the way with a poet.

But the editor did not forget, nor did any one who read the poems. Everywhere in the city people were moved to tears by the beauty of the river's song and the sadness of the little scullery−maid. Gray−haired business folk, lovely ladies of society, unhappy young men and old women — all imagined, while they read the poems, that they, too, were scullery−maids and that the river sang to them; and they faced whatever was unhappy or ugly in their own lives with more courage because of what it said. They did not say much in praise of the little book, but they dried their eyes when they had finished it, and went to buy another copy to send to a friend. Most remarkable of all, they treated their own scullery−maids with more kindness, which is a tremendous thing for a poem to have accomplished. The editor who had recognized before any one else how lovely the poems were was surer than ever that he was a great man.

Scullery−maids were quite heroines, and even the ugly little one in the kitchen of the boarding−house seemed so important that the grocer's boy tried to be her sweetheart. He was a good fellow, and wished to be kind to her, but she would have none of him, because he was not blond, and did not put his hand on her shoulder and say in a tender voice, "You poor child!" — in other words, because he was not a poet; whereas, if she had but known it, it was a lucky thing for her that he was not.

She was so ignorant and neglected that she had never learned to read, and she was almost the only one in the city who did not have the joy of the poems about her river. She found out where the poet's room was, and whenever she could she would slip away to try and catch a glimpse of him. But though he passed her several times on the stairs, he did not notice her. He was so busy living the life of an old, old woman whom he had seen on the other side of town that he could think of nothing else. Still, it was a joy to the scullery−maid even to see him, and as she sat on the platform, peeling potatoes, she thought how yellow his hair was, and how blue his eyes, instead of listening to the river which had comforted her so long.

And then, one day, the poet got so much money from the sale of his little book that he decided to move away to a better boarding−place. When the little scullery−maid heard the news, as she washed the dishes in the greasy kitchen, something snapped inside her head, and she could no longer hear any sound of the river at all.

That day, as she sat peeling the potatoes, the little river flowed past, silently, silently, and yet with so dizzying a gleam that, as she looked long and miserably at it, she lost her balance and fell into the water and was drowned. It was probably the best thing that could have happened to her. For when one can no longer hear any sound of brave song through the hateful noise of dreary toil, when one has lost one's singing river, there is not much to live for, is there?

She was carried down the current and cast ashore on the beach where the river runs into the sea. The poet, walking on the beach, saw her lying there, and straightway fell to imagining the most romantic ideas about an unhappy love story. The tears came to his eyes, although that was nothing surprising for him. A beautiful poem sang in his heart, so that he forgot all about the poor little scullery−maid lying dead at his feet. For that is the way with a poet.

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