

The Housemaid's Story

When I lived out first, ma'am, it was with a lady as had a fine large family of her own, and there was a deal cooked, and great dinners made and breakfasts and suppers likewise; and the provisions were all kept in a storeroom, and Mrs. Madder, the housekeeper, had charge of them, and under her were five servants. The cook and the chambermaid and the waiter, and the housemaid, and the seamstress. Oh, but Mrs. Madder was a quare lookin' little woman, sharp as a hatchet, and cross as two sticks, and she followed us about as if thaving was our trade; and I hadn't been in the house long before I found out that there was continual changing, and that rason always was dishonesty.

Now there'd be wine gone, and now fruit. Now a spoon and now a napkin; and always Mrs. Madder complained, and there was dismissing. Before I'd been there a month a silver handle corkscrew was missing, and the waiter lost his place; and then an old tablecloth, and off went the waitress.

"Dear, dear," says my mistress, says she, "is there no finding an honest servant?"

"Ma'am," says I, hearing her, "I am one, ma'am."

Says she, "You look it, child."

Says I—then says I, all of a sudden like, for the thought popped into my mind in a minute:

"Ma'am, a deal is stolen here, and you can't diskiver the truth. May I ask who finds out the losses?"

"Mrs. Madder—that faithful woman," says she. "But for her I'd be cheated out of my very eyes."

"Maybe so, ma'am," says I. "But, indade, I think the waiter was innocent of the spoon, and Hannah Jane of the cloth."

"I don't know," said [s]he, shaking her head. "Mrs. Madder thinks differently."

"Ma'am," says I, "I've a notion. I want to ask your leave to watch. I'll get at the truth, or I'm no woman, if I've your permission. If I'm caught spooking about I may be thought a thafe myself. Will you stand up for me if I am? indade, ma'am, I'm true and upright, and only anxious to get at the secret, for thaving goes on though the servants change, and there's a mystery in it."

Says she, "You've my lave, Maggie."

And that's how I came to go tiptoeing about of nights, losing my sleep and breaking my rest, and being took for a ghost by the waiter—a new one—and come near breaking my neck on the stairs with master's hot nightcap—I mane a one to swallow—on a tray in his hands.

But come what would I watched on, until one night I said to myself, “What is the use? Things [xxx] I’ll watch one night more, and then I’ll go before I’m sent away on account of spoons I never took or forks I never wanted.”

We counted the silver and linen after dinner, and whenever that is done there’s a loss. Then I looked out from my window and saw that the curtain of Mrs. Madder’s room was up, and that late as it was she was up too.

I could see through into the room, and what I saw was quare enough. There was the old lady, standing at the door with her ear to it, and her shoes off. She listened for a bit, and then nodded her head and went to the closet. Out of it she took a little dark lantern and lit the candle in it. Then she opened the door and went creeping out.

“If she’s found a thave I’ll help her,” said I, and off went my shoes and out I went without a lantern, but I found myself able to see my way by that Mrs. Madder carried, when ever she opened the slide.

Straight ahead she went, the clock striking two that minute, to the dining room, and I followed. I got behind the door and peeped at her as she went fidgeting about, my heart was in my mouth when the thought came to me that if I was found she’d take me for a thave for certain. What was she looking for—what was she doing? In five minutes I knew, for what did the old creature do but take the silver icepitcher from the sideboard and creep away with it.

As for me, I ran to my room as quick as I could, and leant out of my window. And I saw her come in and open a closet and put the pitcher in and lock it up.

“For safety, maybe,” says I. “But we’ll wait and see.”

Next morning came, and we were all in the kitchen, and in comes Mrs. Madder.

“John,” she says to the new waiter, “John, did Mrs. Rose bid you bring the icepitcher to her room last night?”

“No, ma’am,” says John.”

“Where is it, then?” says she.

“On the sideboard,” says he.

“I don’t see it,” says she.

The poor things looked at each other. Mrs. Madder turned on me.

“Where did you go at nine last evening, Maggie?” says she.

“To my aunt’s,” said I, “and an honest woman doesn’t live.”

“We’ll see,” says Mrs. Madder. “Oh, dear! Oh, dear! This is the most valuable loss yet. Mrs. Rose, ma’am, will you step here?” for the mistress was just passing the door.

Then began the hullabulloo. I heard it all without a word for a while and then I spoke:

“Ma’am,” says I, “I’m not the thave, but I found her last night. She went down to the dining-room with a lantern, and hid the pitcher away nate and clever. Oh, Mrs. Madder, ma’am, don’t stare at me. It’s you I mane, and you daren’t open your closet and show the mistress this minute, that you daren’t.”

“My lady would not degrade a gentlewoman in reduced circumstances by asking her to do such a thing at the insistence of a dishonest servant,” says she.

But I up with the axe from the side of the hearth.

“Mrs. Madder,” says I, “I’m honest, and I’ve but my character, if I am poor. Open the door or I’ll chop it down, if I’m hung for it. What I’m sayin’ I’m knowin’ to, ma’am. The pitcher is in her room.

“Mrs. Madder,” says the mistress, “all I ask is that you’ll prove the untruth of this assertion.”

“I won’t be insulted,” says Mrs. Madder.

But master, who had come in, held out his hand.

“Your keys, if you please, Mrs. Madder,” says he.

Oh, how she scowled at him; but she gave him the keys, and master went ahead, and we all followed on but Mrs. Madder; and the closet was opened, and in it, as I knew, was the icepitcher and all the things that had been stolen for years besides.

Oh, how mistress cried, and how master talked; and when we came back to the kitchen there was Mrs. Madder choking. She had tried to hang herself with her garters.

They didn’t send her to prison, or try her as they would a common servant. They called what she’d don by a big name—kleptomania, I’m thinking it was—and let her go; and they apologized to all the poor things they had turned away, and I had my wages raised, and lived there ten long years; but I never could make out why it was that Mrs. Madder was only a klepty—what’s-his-name—and not a thave, as I’d have been if I’d robbed the house wholesale as she did.

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