

Chapter 29

After my husband died, Luie and Visella they said, "Ma, you don't have to go to work anymore. You're an old woman now and so fat to go up and down the stairs and do that heavy cleaning. Stop the work in the Commons."

"No," I said. "Chicago Commons is my home-thirty years working there. I grew up with that place. I love it! I can't stop now." So I was back doing my cleaning.

But pretty soon I got the bad leg, and then I had that other sickness-the time I was supposed to die and didn't. After then I could no more go up and down all those stairs and scrub and lift. The housekeeper said she had to have a younger woman. But I didn't stop entirely-I kept a little job to go two times a week for the cooking when Tillie has her time off. And I never miss the Woman's Club, and a lot of times when they have no program, I tell them the stories. That's why I like so much to go to the moving picture-I learn a new story. The stronger they make it, the better I like it. I never cry. Sometimes I laugh, though.

Oh, I never forget that time poor Ollie from the Commons was sitting down next to me in the picture show. "You dirty brute! she hollered, and she was going right after the stage-she wanted to kill the man in the picture. She was crying.

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Me, I grabbed hold of her and I said, "Sit down, Ollie, sit down and keep still!

The people will think we are drunk women! It's not a real man-it's a story!" And

I had to hold her down. Oh, I miss poor Ollie so much!

One day the housekeeper invited me and Ollie to go downtown and have supper-she

wanted to give us a nice, nice treat. She said we must meet her downtown at four o'clock on one certain corner by Marshall Field's. It was Thursday, so I had my day home, but I did all my washing and cleaning. Ollie, she worked all day scrubbing at the Commons. So I met Ollie and we went. We were kind of scared because we never went downtown alone; but we found the place she told us, and we waited. Ollie said, "Oh, I'm so tired!" She had such sore feet, with the bunion and the corn. She was even crying that she had to stand on them. And then those old shoes she got from somebody, they didn't fit either. Oh, her feet hurt her so much.

Then here came Mis' Bliss, looking like the queen-like the president-with white gloves, with flowers in her hat, and hair all in curls. We two poor women, we had on our best dresses, but we looked so poor and we were so tired from working. Mis' Bliss said, "I tell you what we do: we're going to walk all down State Street and look at all the store windows."

Poor Ollie, so tired with her sore feet aching, she looked to me, and I looked to her. But we didn't say nothing. Oh lordy, lordy! Mis' Bliss, she made us do all that walking on State Street. Me, I felt like crying. I didn't care for no dinner-nothing. She walked till she was tired herself ; just think of us! Five o'clock we came back and she took us in the Chinese place. Oh, it was a beautiful place. But everybody was looking at her like a queen and us two poor women. (Ollie was dressed so poor!)

Mis' Bliss ordered chicken chop suey and all the grandest things. There was a row of silver by our place this big, but me, I was using just one fork so those

poor servants wouldn't have to wash so many dishes. But when Mis' Bliss saw me-she was talking to us like we were babies-she said we must use this, and do this, and so, and so. Then she said, "Now you eat good and enjoy everything." There was a special man in back of her chair dressed up like a [end page 249] soldier, with blue suit and lines. He stayed right there and when he saw the water go down, he called another man to fill up the glass. "Oh, goodness," I said. "What for is that man? "

"He has that job to watch over us," she said. But how are we going to eat with that soldier watching how we do? Oh, lordy, lordy! It was funny, no? And Mis' Bliss, she was so happy with herself-she thought she was giving us such a good time. I was looking what she paid. She gave the man I guess it was a ten-dollar bill, and she got very little back.

Ollie and me, we were very, very friends together. She used to tell me all her troubles, and I told her mine. She used to go downtown and scrub the office building in the night. When she first came to do the scrubbing and cleaning in Chicago Commons she was so dirty dressed-up. She didn't even wash her face and neck or comb her hair, and she had the dirty sweater all pinned up with the safety pins. But she was the best one to do the scrubbing and the cleaning. And little and little, as she came to the Commons, she got clean. That poor woman, oh, she was happy when the teacher told her to come in the Woman's Club. She really washed herself and came to the club clean. She got the clean face and neck, and her hair combed neat. She had the nice yellow hair, and white, white skin. After she was to the Commons five, six months, she was a new woman

entirely. And she was not so stupid, either; she was coming to the class in the night to learn the reading and writing. I remember now the big bunch of roses Ollie bought, when the Woman's Club made that nice party for Dr. Taylor's birthday. Ollie paid seven dollars for those roses! Her family couldn't eat for one week. But oh, she was happy she could give Dr. Taylor those roses!

One time when we were making the Christmas play in the Woman's Club, Ollie was supposed to say "infant," but she couldn't learn it. One high lady who came to the Commons to teach us the parts, she told her, and told her. But Ollie couldn't say "infant Jesus." She all the time said, "Infrant Jesus." So one afternoon when her scrubbing was done, she came where I was working, and she said, "What am I going to do, Rosa? I can't say it! What am I going to say?"

I said, "Well, Ollie, you say 'infrant.' You only must say 'infrant' [end page 250] when you die and go in the other world. Porta infrant is a Latin word the priest says when you close the door here and open to the next world. You've got to say 'infant.' 'Infant' means a baby." And I was making her say it after me, "Infant. Infant. Infant Jesus."

So then when the night came and we went up on the stage, I was listening to Ollie. Sure enough she said, "Infrant Jesus." In one month Ollie was dead. Something there was that made her say that word!

Ollie, her mother died when she was a little girl. When she was thirteen years old, her aunt made her marry an old man sixty years old. He was all the time drunk, and he beat her terrible. Such a life she had, that poor woman, with all those children and not one was right! Her husband, he was too old to work and he

was awful mean. The Commons told Ollie better she leave that man. But she said, "No, he's my husband anyway." And she was not Italian; she was American-born in Chicago.

Ollie, she had the bad kidney sickness, and when she went to the clinic, the doctor pulled out her teeth. That day she came back from the dentist she looked white like the ghost. I was looking and looking. She looked like a saint! I was even jealous of her how beautiful she looked that night. Like an angel! I said, "Ollie, you're too sick. You sit down and I'll wash the floor for you. "

But then, after dinner, the housekeeper said, "Ollie, you've got to wash the dishes tonight-I planned on you. I've got nobody else. A couple of teeth is nothing-you'll be all right."

So Ollie tried to do it, but she couldn't. She fell down on the floor. Me, I washed her dishes, and one dining-room girl took her home. When a teacher in the Commons heard about it, she went to Ollie's house to see. She took Ollie right away to the hospital. The next day poor Ollie was dead. Oh, I did cry for Ollie! I missed her so much. I used to love that poor woman.

The American doctors they ruin the people. I say, "People, don't go to the doctors! Let them alone!" Here in America everybody runs to the doctor. And those doctors! When you get a pain down here in your leg, they look in your mouth and say, "You have to pull out the teeth, that's all." [end page 251]

You get a pain in your stomach, and they say, "Take off the tonsils."

They tell you to take off all those things and they won't cure you till you do.

They won't! In Italia we don't take off nothing-we keep everything, and we are

not sick. God gave us all those little things: what for the doctors take them off? It's not right. And then they tell you to open the window to sleep and let in all the germs from the night air. The American people ruin themselves by running all the time to those crazy doctors. But I mustn't say bad about the doctors because sometimes they do good too. God made them, so we've got to have them, that's all.

When I had those eleven days the terrible pain in my leg, the sciatica, the doctor he wanted to pull out my teeth, but I wouldn't let him; that's why he wouldn't cure me. But the soul of purgatory cured me without taking the teeth. Another time I was so sick I was ready to die. When the doctor said I was going to die, I was not frightened; I was ready to call the priest and have the sacrament. But I was wishing that I could live just for the Holy Year. Miss Taylor came from the Commons and stayed by me all night, and she was crying. I said, "Don't cry like that, Miss Taylor. I go to heaven and I'll pray God for you and for Chicago Commons."

The doctor was there listening to my heart and he said I have only a little while. But then he thought of something and he wrote it on a little paper and sent Luie running down to one drugstore that stayed open. In fifteen minutes Luie came back with some little pills. Six o'clock morning I began to get better and in one month I was up and well. And oh, I was thanking God that I got well and can live for the Holy Year. But my son-in-law, that new husband Visella got, he was mad at me that I didn't die when I was supposed to! He and Visella were figuring and figuring and running around to get all the money I had. And there I

fooled them-I didn't die. They were so mad. The doctor told them before that it's better if they wait. My Luie didn't do like that: he didn't even ask about the money-he just kept saying to me, "You're going to be well again, Ma. You're going to be all right again! " [end page 252]

Oh, I was glad that I lived for that Eucharist Year in Chicago! It was 1926. If you died in that year you had the plenary indulgence-all your sins were forgiven-you went right to heaven. But even then I was not wishing to die. Me, I'm not afraid of the death, but I never can forget that snake in the cemetery. One day me and my Visella went to fix the grave of Gionin. Nobody was there-only far over were one or two men doing the digging. We were walking quiet, quiet, because all that silence in the cemetery made us feel kind of scared. But we had to walk some more and we passed a new hole where the dirt was just dug up. We looked in-I don't know what made us look in that hole-and there was a great big snake waiting to eat up the dead! No, I never can forget that day in the cemetery. But me, I'm not afraid of the death. I don't care if the worms and the snakes eat my body when the soul is not in. They can't hurt me then. When I come to my end, I won't need this old body anymore-let it go to the dust. Our body goes all back to the dirt but not the soul. The soul goes on. I'm not afraid, but I'm never wishing to die. I like to live.

Now I make for nine months the confession and Communion every first Friday for una buona morte-for a good death. I have only four more Fridays to go-I made five months already. Then I will have a good death. When it's my time I will die willing, without fighting God. I want to die quiet in my bed; I don't want to

struggle.

But I don't wish that I die; I have it like heaven now. I'm really in heaven-no man to scold me and make me do this and stop me to do that. My Luie, so long he's not married, he lives with me, but he never scolds me for nothing. If I have his meal ready, all right; if no, all right too. I have my house to live and Luie pays the food, so I don't have to worry about the living. I keep my little job in the settlement house, so I have that money extra and I can go to the picture-show and see the good story. I have it like heaven-I'm my own boss. The peace I've got now it pays me for all the trouble I had in my life. I guess God says, "That poor Mis' Cavalleri, she suffered enough when she was a young girl in the silk factory. I'm going to let her have it easy now-she deserves it."

Of course sometimes I have a little trouble in my heart. It's like [end page 253] this, I guess: you know the mother, she all the time carries her baby on her right arm. When she puts him on her left arm he gets cross-he scolds and cries and doesn't like it. She can't hold him so good on her left arm. So God does to us. He always carries us on his right arm; when He changes and puts us on His left arm, we don't like it-it's not comfortable. But I always know where to go to get happy again. The Madonna is the one to take care for us poor women. You've got to have the faith in your heart-you've got to believe. But it's true and true: if you pray with all your heart and beg God and pray the Madonna you get help for sure. You get happy again. The Madonna, She helped me all through my life, and now She gives me peace.

Only one wish more I have: I'd love to go in Italia again before I die. Now I speak English good like an American I could go anywhere-where millionaires go and high people. I would look the high people in the face and ask them what questions I'd like to know. I wouldn't be afraid now-not of anybody. I'd be proud I come from America and speak English. I would go to Bugiaro and see the people and talk to the bosses in the silk factory. And to Canaletto. Those sisters would not throw me out when I come from America! I could talk to Superiora now. I'd tell her, "Why you were so mean-you threw out that poor girl whose heart was so kind toward you? You think you'll go to heaven like that? " I'd scold them like that now. I wouldn't be afraid. They wouldn't dare hurt me now I come from America. Me, that's why I love America. That's what I learned in America: not to be afraid. [end page 254]