

I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

Dodie Smith

I write this sitting in the kitchen sink. That is, my feet are in it; the rest of me on the draining-board, which I have padded with our dog's blanket and the tea-cosy. I can't say that I am really comfortable, and there is a depressing smell of carbolic soap, but this is the only part of the kitchen where there is any daylight left. And I have found that sitting in a place where you have never sat before can be inspiring - I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the hen-house. Though even that isn't a very good poem. I have decided my poetry is so bad that I mustn't write any more of it.

It is comforting to look away from the windows towards the kitchen fire, near which my sister Rose is ironing - though she obviously can't see properly, and it will be a pity if she scorches her only nightgown. (I have two, but one is minus its behind.) Rose looks particularly fetching by firelight because she is pinkish person; her skin has a pink glow and her hair is pinkish gold, very light and feathery. Although I am rather used to her I know she is a beauty. She is nearly twenty-one and very bitter with life. I am seventeen, look younger, feel older. I am no beauty but have a neatish face.

I am writing this journal partly to practise my newly acquired speed-writing and partly to teach myself how to write a novel - I intend to capture all our characters and put in conversations. It ought to be good for my style to dash along without much thought, as up to now my stories have been very stiff and self-conscious. The only time father obliged me by reading one of them, he said I combined stateliness with a desperate effort to be funny. He told me to relax and let the words flow out of me.

Mother died eight years ago, from perfectly natural causes, I think she must have been a shadowy person, because I have only the vaguest memory of her and I have an excellent memory for most things.

Three years ago (or is it four? I know father's one spasm of sociability was in 1931) a stepmother was presented to us. We were surprised. She is a famous artists' model who claims to have been christened Topaz - even if this is true there is no law to make a woman stick to a name like that. She is very beautiful, with masses of hair so fair that it is almost white, and a quite extraordinary pallor. She uses no make-up, not even powder. There are two paintings of her in the Tate Gallery: one by Macmorris, called "Topaz in Jade", in which she wears a magnificent jade necklace; and one by H. J. Allardy which shows her nude on an old horsehair-covered sofa that she says was very prickly. This is called "Composition"; but as Allardy has painted her even paler than she is, "Decomposition" would suit it better.

Actually, there is nothing unhealthy about Topaz's pallor; it simply makes her look as if she belonged to some new race. She has a very deep voice - that is, she puts one on; it is part of an arty pose, which includes painting and lute-playing. But her kindness is perfectly genuine and so is her cooking. I am very, very fond of her - it is nice to have written that just as she appears on the kitchen stairs. She is wearing her ancient orange tea-gown. Her pale, straight hair is flowing down her back to her waist. She paused on the top step and said "Ah, girls . . ." with three velvety inflections on each word.

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Now she is sitting on the steel trivet, raking the fire. The pink light makes her look more ordinary, but very pretty. She is twenty-nine and had two husbands before father (she will never tell us very much about them), but she still looks extraordinarily young. Perhaps that is because her expression is so blank.

The kitchen looks very beautiful now. The firelight glows steadily through the bars and through the round hole in the top of the range where the lid has been left off. It turns the white washed walls rosy; even the dark beams in the roof are a dusky gold. The highest beam is over thirty feet from the ground. Rose and Topaz are two tiny figures in a great glowing cave.

I feel quite unreasonably happy this minute, watching them both; knowing I can go and join them in the warmth, yet staying in the cold.

Goodness, Topaz is actually putting on eggs to boil! No one told me the hens had yielded to prayer. Oh, excellent hens! I was only expecting bread and margarine for tea, and I don't get as used to margarine as I could wish. I thank heaven there is no cheaper form of bread than bread.

I shall have to get off the draining-board - Topaz wants the tea-cosy and our dog, Heloise, has come in and discovered I have borrowed her blanket. She is a bull-terrier, snowy white except where her fondant-pink skin shows through her short hair. All right, Heloise darling, you shall have your blanket. She gazes at me with love, reproach, confidence and humour - how can she express so much just with two rather small slanting eyes?

I finish this entry sitting on the stairs. I think it worthy of note that I never felt happier in my life - despite sorrow for father, pity for Rose, embarrassment about Stephen's poetry and no justification for hope as regards our family's general outlook. Perhaps it is because I have satisfied my creative urge; or it may be due to the thought of eggs for tea.