

LBRIS

We know
books

PROVINCIAL DAUGHTER

R. M. Dashwood

ILLUSTRATED BY
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Virago

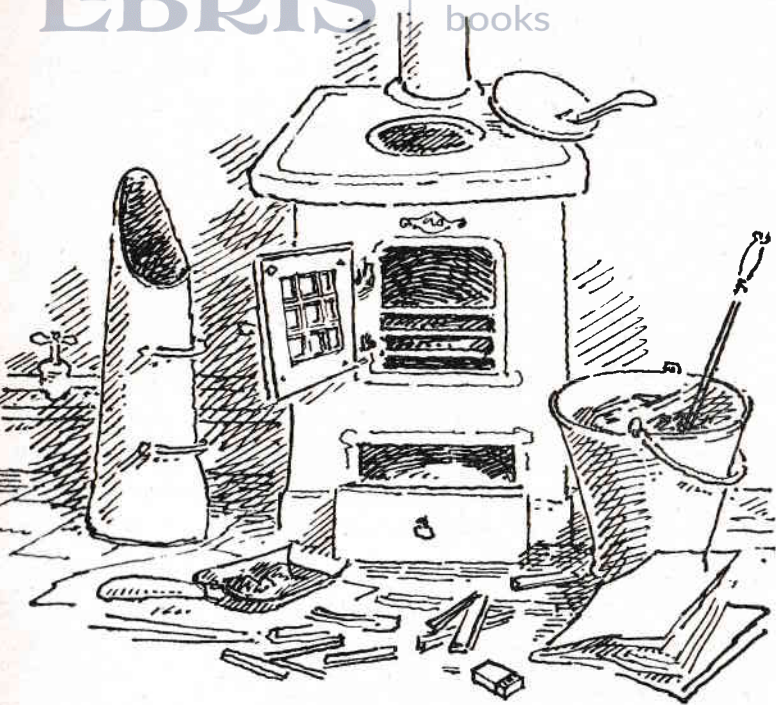
SEPTEMBER

Monday, 10th

Am disconcerted, at breakfast, to receive letter from old school friend saying What am I doing with My Brain these days, and isn't it a Pity to Let It All Go? Know what she means but am very angry nevertheless, and lose myself thinking out some really telling replies.

Am recalled by Toby asking thoughtfully How Do You Make Soggy Paper? and by Ben flinging toast in all directions from his high chair. Two older children applaud this warmly, and James says, in tones of utmost besottedness, that Ben's Manners are *Atrociable*. Lift Ben down and send all three children away and give Lee a second cup of tea—(why can't men help themselves?).

Return to letter from old school friend and ponder deeply; am I wasting whatever brain I had and a very expensive education? Resolve to keep meticulous record of activities for a while and *see*. Ask Lee if he thinks I should keep a diary? He replies that he thinks the blasted boiler has gone out and do I know if James borrowed his chopper because he can't find it and What did I Say? Make up my own mind to ask for no further advice but to keep diary. *Later*. Achieve washing, incredible number of shirts, shorts and underpants, all in the last stages of grubbiness. Normally efficient small washing machine obviously finds it all too much and thick grey water cascades over floor.



(New linoleum. When the men laid it they warned me never to get it wet.) Mop laboriously with retired nappy. James and Toby join in enthusiastically with nappies that I later discover not to be retired at all but straight from the Airing Cupboard. Ben saunters in and with obvious memories of recent summer holiday at seaside, dabbles and splashes joyfully. Send them all away angrily. (Good mothers never lose their tempers. I am not a good mother.) Finally finish mopping floor, hang out washing in rain, and hurry upstairs to make beds.

Had forgotten that due to Ben's recent climbing excesses

Lee has stopped up every conceivable danger point with home-made gates—(dismembered play-pen). Progress upstairs, laden with Vacuum Cleaner, mop, duster, etc., resembles Gymkhana Event. Over the gate . . . the in-and-out . . . the stile . . . and, oh dear, the Water-jump. Oh Ben!

Deposit cleaning materials, retrace laborious progress, find Ben ("Ooh, Mummie, he's *sopping*"), cart him over Gymkhana Course and change him. James and Toby join us and offer to Do the Vacuuming. They fight bitterly as to who shall be first to exercise this great privilege. My suggestion that they might make their own beds too is apparently inaudible. Make beds and cope with other, more sordid, matters. ("Look, Ben, *plug*; Ben say *plug*? *Plug*, Ben.") Wish vainly that James and Toby would concentrate on teaching their Trappist baby brother more suitable words. Reflect also that somebody once said, I can't recall who, but suppose it was a Frenchman, that he would be all for Democracy "*mais qui videra le pot-de-chambre?*" Reply, obviously, "*Moi*". Fear that this is the nearest I get to an intellectual thought during the morning.

Put Ben down for rest and hurry downstairs to cook lunch. Wish I could ever think of anything other than Mince to do with remains of week-end joint. People on wireless for ever suggesting splendid ideas but never can find pencil and paper in time to make note of them, and memory totally unreliable. Cookery book can only offer tiresomely over-elaborate dishes and moreover is inclined officiously to add "*The wine is optional*"; as far as I am concerned the whole thing is optional. Make usual mince, followed by sago pudding; cannot imagine why this is so

popular with children. Spend entire meal saying Take Your Elbows off the Table, Shut your Mouth While You Are Eating, Hold Your Knife and Fork Properly, Ben, Don't do That, and Don't Encourage Him. (Good mothers don't nag.) James and Toby treat it all as normal accompaniment to intelligent mealtime conversation and discuss James' recent eye operation in imaginative detail, the latest serial in *Eagle*, and a character called Tennyson, a native, he climbed Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary.

Customary walk in afternoon follows customary route, down High Street, round the village, and home. Would love a little variety, plenty of alternative possibilities, but James and Toby implore that we stick to it and point out reasonably enough that Ben and I can go where we like in



term-time. Boys talk incessantly and very loudly and Ben forgets his Trappist role and practises singing, also very loudly. Realise too late that I meant to be a good mother and point out Beauties of Nature, Wild Flowers, Lambs . . . (no, not at this time of year now I come to think of it); have, however, as so often before, failed. Children's observations confined to Is that a Bull or a Cow, and subsequent embarrassing discussion from which I entirely dissociate myself.

Tuesday, 11th

Long-awaited trip to London. James and Toby immensely concerned as to What They Shall Wear, and my own sartorial problems pass comparatively unnoticed. (Only good coat and skirt definitely too tight; which looks worse, odd nylons or laddered matching ones; and do people in London wear hats these days?) Finally decide that I Will Do, and that boys definitely look nice in clean shirts and ties, and Ben engaging in tweed coat and leggings.

Despite careful planning, reach station in fearful rush at eleventh hour, train on point of departure, and are thrust by helpful porter into very end carriage in nick of time. This proves to be labelled Ladies Only, which provokes Toby to unseemly mirth and James into panic that he will be Put in Prison. Journey spent calming both and trying to dissuade Ben from crawling under seats. Tweed outfit looks steadily less and less attractive.

On arrival proceed to friend Janet's flat in Somerset Square only to find that I have forgotten number. Square is enormous and deserted, and taxi-driver is sympathetic but

not unnaturally unable to help. He finally drives away shaking his head over my improvidence, as well he may, and Ben gets heavier and heavier. James runs about distractedly, and Toby takes opportunity to sit on pavement and take shoe off which he says is Broken. Am very unsympathetic indeed and beg him to get up, whereupon James suddenly shrieks There are Jeremy and Julian (sons of dear friend Janet), and so they are, both dressed in oldest and grubbier of clothes, returning from playing with a friend. Thankfully follow them to their flat.

Janet (always so clever at school and College) presents remarkable appearance in striped tunic affair and tapered slacks, exactly like something in glossy magazine advertisements. Hair (surely used to be much darker?) scraped uncompromisingly back with wide velvet band; wonder how this would suit me but realise at once that such a style needs a better nose than I have ever possessed. She greets us with rather *distracted* effusion, flat is in state of total, but cultured, untidiness. (Flowers in vase on floor, is this very contemporary or just absent-mindedness? and remarkable picture hung low on crimson wallpaper is either very modern and clever or Janet did it herself.)

Lunch in kitchen, homely touch here but Janet succeeds in making it all seem Bohemian and arty, whereas with us it's just squalid. Food odd. (Can she have forgotten we were corning?) Hiss at Toby to eat up his peas without saying anything. He instantly says loudly that he Doesn't Like Tinned Peas. Second course, however, great success with all children as Janet has taken ingeniously simple way out of perennial What Shall we Have for Pudding problem

by providing bars of chocolate all round. (Can foresee long arguments at home.) Do not really consider this a Balanced Meal but am bound to admit that Julian and Jeremy look perfectly well-nourished and are moreover much better behaved than my children.

Leave Ben to have his rest under Janet's auspices and depart with Toby and James for Madame Tussaud's.

Expedition immense success, only marred by fact that Death of Nelson tableau which boys particularly want to see is shrouded in curtains, being cleaned. Execution of Mary Queen of Scots, however, proves absorbing, and reflect, not for the first time, that my sons appear to be devoid of desirable quality of Compassion. After what feels like hours and hours of walking about and gazing, including aeons in hall devoted to Penny-in-the-Slot machines at which we spend a small fortune, but *not* Chamber of Horrors because of Toby's nightmares, decide that it Is Time To Go. Boys both assume expressions of extreme agony and say very loudly that They Must Spend Pennies First. Escort them to Gents and wait outside for ages. Finally decide that one or both have fallen down dead inside, and with some diffidence ask total stranger, just going in, if he would mind Sending the Two Little Boys Out if They Have Finished. Realise that this might have been more prettily put, but total stranger (must be a father) is kindness itself and causes J and T to emerge instantly.

Return to Janet's flat, Ben weeps at sight of us but Janet assures us he has been Very Good Up To Now (hope this is true), and we all eat enormous tea, are collected by Lee in

car and get home very late. Boys instantly demand another meal, and have to be pacified with Tinned Soup in Bed.

Am quite incredibly exhausted by whole day and go to bed shortly after children.

Wednesday, 12th

Day wholly devoted to domestic chores. House has become incomprehensibly neglected and untidy due to one day's absence; moreover all clothes worn in London are pitch black and must be washed. Toby helps with washing and says All He Wishes is that he could Sometimes Have Clean Sheets. Am stunned and contrite, although morally certain that his complaint is unjustified, and change everybody's sheets. Realise towards lunch-time that I have not seen James for hours, and then find him propped up against Bread Bin in Larder reading very old Comic. He appears to be unaware of his whereabouts or my presence so leave him to it; can only hope this mania for reading will eventually lead to Good Books.

Spend afternoon Catching Up On Ironing, interrupted by telephone call from gloomy neighbour, Mrs Parnell, to tell me that She Has Arthritis, her Husband is in Plaster (why?) and Jenny's as Thin as a Rake. Feel I cannot let her get away with all the medical kudos and counter with James' Eye Operation. Mrs P interrupts triumphantly and yet with unabated gloom that Albert's eyes were *inoperable*. Do not attempt to continue conversation but ring off feeling quite depressed at extreme good health of my family.

At supper (baked beans and bread and cheese in kitchen), Lee says he Thinks I Ought To Have Window Above the



Sink. Agree incautiously that it Would Be Nice, and am thunderstruck when he adds casually that he will Knock a Hole in the Wall next week-end and See What Can Be Done. I beg him not to do anything so rash, and say What About Stresses and Strains? Can only hope that he will forget all about it, but know all too well that the only

Handyman jobs that dear Lee ever forgets are the ones I have particularly asked him to do.

Discuss this and other matters at length. . . . (How can we afford to send Three Sons to Boarding School, Where does all the Housekeeping Go To, How we Wish we were Rich, and Had we better give up Smoking.) Find that it is after eleven o'clock, wash up, tidy up, lay breakfast, take off apron and go to bed. Why do we have a sitting-room? We never sit in it, but it always seems to want cleaning. Suppose that we shall be calling it the Parlour next, and keeping it for Weddings and Funerals.

Thursday, 13th

In view of cocktail party this evening at house of Rich Unknown Neighbour, Lady Eveleigh-Anderson, waste great part of morning gloomily gazing into mirror and realising once again that I am Getting Fatter and Need a Perm. Children are encouraging and say I Am Beautiful. Feel better. Ask if they think I should Grow My Hair and Do it in a Bun. They shriek with horror and say it would be Unwomanly. Ben opens one and only box of powder and tips it over bed. All is confusion and I am very cross. Looks not improved. Eventually wash hair and do nails and realise it is long past lunch-time; at belated meal children eat vast helpings of everything and I eat nothing in frail hope that it may make me thinner. Later in afternoon am ravenous and James kindly gives me bar of chocolate which I am too weak-minded not to eat.

Get to Party rather late owing to extreme difficulty of putting children to bed and getting self and Lee ready by

half-past six. (Wish people would not give parties at this impossible hour.) Baby-sitter eventually chivvies us out of house with assurances that she will read to J and T and put their light out. Walking round to Lady E-A's promise Lee that I will not talk about the Children. Or cooking, he adds.

Party very enjoyable, except that everyone I speak to asks me How Are Your Children? Lady E-A proves to be very elegant and kind with blue-rinsed hair which I admire. She says she Knew My Mother which interests me, but as it was years before I was born can think of nothing to say. She then says my Husband is Very Handsome which pleases me but can think of no rejoinder that does not sound either ungracious or conceited. She adds that He Must Be Wonderful to Live With and I wonder if she means what I think she means, and can still find nothing to answer. She concludes by saying that she is Only Speaking as an Outsider, and I instantly think of several replies none of which would be seemly. We then part, Lady E-A still unflaggingly kind but clearly feeling I am unworthy of Lee. (Am quite prepared to agree.) Feel that I do not shine as a conversationalist and that Impenetrable Silence is to shroud me for ever, but am rescued by charming American acquaintance with decanter who plies me with wine and sparkling conversation until I feel quite witty. Evening gets more and more entertaining and am just getting rather carried away in conversation with Fascinating Stranger who is an Artist, on whom I am sufficiently merry to inflict my views on Matisse (whose pictures I have never set eyes on), when Lee appears and hisses at me that Everyone Seems to be Going.