What was Bessie's 'little weakness'?

It is a good thing my aunt Harriet died years ago.

If she were alive today, she would not be able to air her views on her favorite topic of conversation: domestic servants.

Aunt Harriet lived in that leisurely age when servants were employed to do housework.

She had a huge, rambling country house called 'The Gables'.

She was sentimentally attached to this house, for even though it was far too big for her needs, she persisted in living there long after her among the guests husband's death.

Before she grew old, Aunt Harriet used to entertain lavishly.

I often visited The Gables when I was a boy.

No matter how many guests were present, the great house was always immaculate.

The parquet floors shone like mirrors; highly polished silver was displayed in gleaming glass cabinets; even my uncle's huge collection of books was kept miraculously free from dust.

Aunt Harriet presided over an invisible army of servants that continuously scrubbed, cleaned, and polished.

She always referred to them as 'the shifting population', for they came and went with such frequency that I never even got a chance to learn their names.

Though my aunt pursued what was, in those days, an enlightened policy, in that she never allowed her domestic staff to work more than eight hours a day, she was extremely difficult to please.

While she always criticized the fickleness of human nature, she carried on an unrelenting search for the ideal servant to the end of her days, even after she had been sadly disillusioned by Bessie.

Bessie worked for Aunt Harriet for three years.

During that time, she so gained my aunt's confidence that she was put in charge of the domestic staff.

Aunt Harriet could not find words to praise Bessie's industriousness and efficiency.

In addition to all her other qualifications, Bessie was an expert cook.

She acted the role of the perfect servant for three years before Aunt Harriet discovered her 'little weakness'.

After being absent from The Gables for a week, my aunt unexpectedly returned one afternoon with a party of guests and instructed Bessie to prepare dinner.

Not only was the meal well below the usual standard, but Bessie seemed unable to walk steadily.

She bumped into the furniture and kept mumbling about the guests.

When she came in with the last course — a huge pudding — she tripped on the carpet and the pudding went flying through the air, narrowly missed my aunt, and crashed on the dining table with considerable force.

Though this caused great mirth among the guests, Aunt Harriet was horrified.

She reluctantly came to the conclusion that Bessie was drunk.

The guests had, of course, realized this from the moment Bessie opened the door for them and, long before the final catastrophe, had had a difficult time trying to conceal their amusement.

The poor girl was dismissed instantly.

After her departure, Aunt Harriet discovered that there were piles of empty wine bottles of all shapes and sizes neatly stacked in what had once been Bessie's wardrobe.

They had mysteriously found their way there from the wine cellar!

On her return with a party of guests, Aunt Harriet asked Bessie to prepare dinner.

Not only was the meal below standard, Bessie could not walk steadily, and she bumped into furniture and mumbled at the guests.

When she brought in the pudding, she tripped and the pudding crashed onto the dining table.

While the guests were very amused, Aunt Harriet was horrified.

She realized Bessie was drunk and dismissed her immediately.

Domestic servants still exist, but nowadays, instead of working for rich old ladies, they only work for members of the royal family, aristocrats, film stars, pop stars, successful businessmen, and other rich and famous people, and there are really very few of them.

The great age of domestic servants is past.

There are many reasons why there is such a small number of domestic servants now.

The first thing, of course, is that there are very few families that own big houses that need domestic servants.

Many of the large country houses in Britain that need servants have been bought by an organisation called the National Trust and many of the people who help to run these properties are voluntary.

They are certainly not 'servants' and they believe that they are helping to preserve the heritage of Great Britain.

The houses that are still owned privately are now run much more efficiently than they used to be, and very few entertain guests as they used to do.

Instead, they open their gates to the general public, and SO they need the same staff that major entertainments need.

True, such large houses have some domestic staff, but they employ many other people who would not like to think of themselves as 'domestic servants'-waiters and waitresses in their cafés, cleaners, car park attendants, ticket collectors, guides, office staff, and so on.

I am personally pleased that there are SO few people in domestic service now.

Most of us work for someone else, it's true, but the whole idea of being a 'servant', a 'domestic servant', is an idea connected more with past centuries than the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

In the days when the writer used to visit 'The Gables', he always found the house spotlessly clean.

Bessie was made responsible for the domestic staff because my aunt trusted her.

When the pudding crashed on the table, Aunt Harriet was horrified because it was only then that she realized how drunk Bessie was.

After Bessie's dismissal, Aunt Harriet found a great many bottles of wine in Bessie's wardrobe.

Bessie seemed incapable of walking steadily.