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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

She had not meant to stay for the service. The door had stood invitingly open, and a glimpse of the interior had suggested to her the idea that it would make good copy. “Old London Churches: Their Social and Historical Associations.” It would be easy to collect anecdotes of the famous people who had attended them. She might fix up a series for one of the religious papers. It promised quite exceptional material, this particular specimen, rich in tombs and monuments. There was character about it, a scent of bygone days. She pictured the vanished congregations in their powdered wigs and stiff brocades. How picturesque must have been the marriages that had taken place there, say in the reign of Queen Anne or of the early Georges. The church would have been ancient even then. With its air of faded grandeur, its sculptured recesses and dark niches, the tattered banners hanging from its roof, it must have made an admirable background. Perhaps an historical novel in the Thackeray vein? She could see her heroine walking up the aisle on the arm of her proud old soldier father. Later on, when her journalistic position was more established, she might think of it. It was still quite early. There

would be nearly half an hour before the first worshippers would be likely to arrive: just time enough to jot down a few notes. If she did ever take to literature it would be the realistic school, she felt, that would appeal to her. The rest, too, would be pleasant after her long walk from Westminster. She would find a secluded seat in one of the high, stiff pews, and let the atmosphere of the place sink into her.

And then the pew-opener had stolen up unobserved, and had taken it so for granted that she would like to be shown round, and had seemed so pleased and eager, that she had not the heart to repel her. A curious little old party with a smooth, peach-like complexion and white soft hair that the fading twilight, stealing through the yellow glass, turned to gold. So that at first sight Joan took her for a child. The voice, too, was so absurdly childish – appealing, and yet confident. Not until they were crossing the aisle, where the clearer light streamed in through the open doors, did Joan see that she was very old and feeble, with about her figure that curious patient droop that comes to the work-worn. She proved to be most interesting and full of helpful information. Mary Stopperton was her name. She had lived in the neighbourhood all her life; had as a girl worked for the Leigh Hunts and had "assisted" Mrs. Carlyle. She had been very frightened of the great man himself, and had always hidden herself behind doors or squeezed herself into corners and stopped breathing whenever there had been any fear of meeting him upon the stairs. Until one day having darted into a cupboard

to escape from him and drawn the door to after her, it turned out to be the cupboard in which Carlyle was used to keep his boots. So that there was quite a struggle between them; she holding grimly on to the door inside and Carlyle equally determined to open it and get his boots. It had ended in her exposure, with trembling knees and scarlet face, and Carlyle had addressed her as "woman," and had insisted on knowing what she was doing there. And after that she had lost all terror of him. And he had even allowed her with a grim smile to enter occasionally the sacred study with her broom and pan. It had evidently made a lasting impression upon her, that privilege.

"They didn't get on very well together, Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle?" Joan queried, scenting the opportunity of obtaining first-class evidence.

"There wasn't much difference, so far as I could see, between them and most of us," answered the little old lady. "You're not married, dear," she continued, glancing at Joan's ungloved hand, "but people must have a deal of patience when they have to live with us for twenty-four hours a day. You see, little things we do and say without thinking, and little ways we have that we do not notice ourselves, may all the time be irritating to other people."

"What about the other people irritating us?" suggested Joan.

"Yes, dear, and of course that can happen too," agreed the little old lady.

"Did he, Carlyle, ever come to this church?" asked Joan.

Mary Stopperton was afraid he never had, in spite of its being

so near. “And yet he was a dear good Christian – in his way,” Mary Stopperton felt sure.

“How do you mean ‘in his way’?” demanded Joan. It certainly, if Froude was to be trusted, could not have been the orthodox way.

“Well, you see, dear,” explained the little old lady, “he gave up things. He could have ridden in his carriage” – she was quoting, it seemed, the words of the Carlyles’ old servant – “if he’d written the sort of lies that people pay for being told, instead of throwing the truth at their head.”

“But even that would not make him a Christian,” argued Joan.

“It is part of it, dear, isn’t it?” insisted Mary Stopperton. “To suffer for one’s faith. I think Jesus must have liked him for that.”

They had commenced with the narrow strip of burial ground lying between the south side of the church and Cheyne Walk. And there the little pew-opener had showed her the grave of Anna, afterwards Mrs. Spragg. “Who long declining wedlock and aspiring above her sex fought under her brother with arms and manly attire in a flagship against the French.” As also of Mary Astell, her contemporary, who had written a spirited “Essay in Defence of the Fair Sex.” So there had been a Suffrage Movement as far back as in the days of Pope and Swift.

Returning to the interior, Joan had duly admired the Cheyne monument, but had been unable to disguise her amusement before the tomb of Mrs. Colvile, whom the sculptor had represented as a somewhat impatient lady, refusing to await the

day of resurrection, but pushing through her coffin and starting for Heaven in her grave-clothes. Pausing in front of the Dacre monument, Joan wondered if the actor of that name, who had committed suicide in Australia, and whose London address she remembered had been Dacre House just round the corner, was descended from the family; thinking that, if so, it would give an up-to-date touch to the article. She had fully decided now to write it. But Mary Stopperton could not inform her. They had ended up in the chapel of Sir Thomas More. He, too, had "given up things," including his head. Though Mary Stopperton, siding with Father Morris, was convinced he had now got it back, and that with the remainder of his bones it rested in the tomb before them.

There, the little pew-opener had left her, having to show the early-comers to their seats; and Joan had found an out-of-the-way pew from where she could command a view of the whole church. They were chiefly poor folk, the congregation; with here and there a sprinkling of faded gentility. They seemed in keeping with the place. The twilight faded and a snuffy old man shuffled round and lit the gas.

It was all so sweet and restful. Religion had never appealed to her before. The business-like service in the bare cold chapel where she had sat swinging her feet and yawning as a child had only repelled her. She could recall her father, aloof and awe-inspiring in his Sunday black, passing round the bag. Her mother, always veiled, sitting beside her, a thin, tall woman

with passionate eyes and ever restless hands; the women mostly overdressed, and the sleek, prosperous men trying to look meek. At school and at Girton, chapel, which she had attended no oftener than she was obliged, had had about it the same atmosphere of chill compulsion. But here was poetry. She wondered if, after all, religion might not have its place in the world – in company with the other arts. It would be a pity for it to die out. There seemed nothing to take its place. All these lovely cathedrals, these dear little old churches, that for centuries had been the focus of men's thoughts and aspirations. The harbour lights, illumining the troubled waters of their lives. What could be done with them? They could hardly be maintained out of the public funds as mere mementoes of the past. Besides, there were too many of them. The tax-payer would naturally grumble. As Town Halls, Assembly Rooms? The idea was unthinkable. It would be like a performance of Barnum's Circus in the Coliseum at Rome. Yes, they would disappear. Though not, she was glad to think, in her time. In towns, the space would be required for other buildings. Here and there some gradually decaying specimen would be allowed to survive, taking its place with the feudal castles and walled cities of the Continent: the joy of the American tourist, the text-book of the antiquary. A pity! Yes, but then from the aesthetic point of view it was a pity that the groves of ancient Greece had ever been cut down and replanted with currant bushes, their altars scattered; that the stones of the temples of Isis should have come to be the shelter of the fisher

of the Nile; and the corn wave in the wind above the buried shrines of Mexico. All these dead truths that from time to time had encumbered the living world. Each in its turn had had to be cleared away.

And yet was it altogether a dead truth: this passionate belief in a personal God who had ordered all things for the best: who could be appealed to for comfort, for help? Might it not be as good an explanation as any other of the mystery surrounding us? It had been so universal. She was not sure where, but somewhere she had come across an analogy that had strongly impressed her. "The fact that a man feels thirsty – though at the time he may be wandering through the Desert of Sahara – proves that somewhere in the world there is water." Might not the success of Christianity in responding to human needs be evidence in its favour? The Love of God, the Fellowship of the Holy Ghost, the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Were not all human needs provided for in that one comprehensive promise: the desperate need of man to be convinced that behind all the seeming muddle was a loving hand guiding towards good; the need of the soul in its loneliness for fellowship, for strengthening; the need of man in his weakness for the kindly grace of human sympathy, of human example.

And then, as fate would have it, the first lesson happened to be the story of Jonah and the whale. Half a dozen shocked faces turned suddenly towards her told Joan that at some point in the thrilling history she must unconsciously have laughed. Fortunately she was alone in the pew, and feeling herself scarlet,

squeezed herself into its farthest corner and drew down her veil.

No, it would have to go. A religion that solemnly demanded of grown men and women in the twentieth century that they should sit and listen with reverential awe to a prehistoric edition of "Grimm's Fairy Stories," including Noah and his ark, the adventures of Samson and Delilah, the conversations between Balaam and his ass, and culminating in what if it were not so appallingly wicked an idea would be the most comical of them all: the conception of an elaborately organized Hell, into which the God of the Christians plunged his creatures for all eternity! Of what use was such a religion as that going to be to the world of the future?

She must have knelt and stood mechanically, for the service was ended. The pulpit was occupied by an elderly uninteresting-looking man with a troublesome cough. But one sentence he had let fall had gripped her attention. For a moment she could not remember it, and then it came to her: "All Roads lead to Calvary." It struck her as rather good. Perhaps he was going to be worth listening to. "To all of us, sooner or later," he was saying, "comes a choosing of two ways: either the road leading to success, the gratification of desires, the honour and approval of our fellow-men – or the path to Calvary."

And then he had wandered off into a maze of detail. The tradesman, dreaming perhaps of becoming a Whiteley, having to choose whether to go forward or remain for all time in the little shop. The statesman – should he abide by the faith that is in

him and suffer loss of popularity, or renounce his God and enter the Cabinet? The artist, the writer, the mere labourer – there were too many of them. A few well-chosen examples would have sufficed. And then that irritating cough!

And yet every now and then he would be arresting. In his prime, Joan felt, he must have been a great preacher. Even now, decrepit and wheezy, he was capable of flashes of magnetism, of eloquence. The passage where he pictured the Garden of Gethsemane. The fair Jerusalem, only hidden from us by the shadows. So easy to return to. Its soft lights shining through the trees, beckoning to us; its mingled voices stealing to us through the silence, whispering to us of its well-remembered ways, its pleasant places, its open doorways, friends and loved ones waiting for us. And above, the rock-strewn Calvary: and crowning its summit, clear against the starlit sky, the cold, dark cross. "Not perhaps to us the bleeding hands and feet, but to all the bitter tears. Our Calvary may be a very little hill compared with the mountains where Prometheus suffered, but to us it is steep and lonely."

There he should have stopped. It would have been a good note on which to finish. But it seemed there was another point he wished to make. Even to the sinner Calvary calls. To Judas – even to him the gates of the life-giving Garden of Gethsemane had not been closed. "With his thirty pieces of silver he could have stolen away. In some distant crowded city of the Roman Empire have lived unknown, forgotten. Life still had its pleasures, its

rewards. To him also had been given the choice. The thirty pieces of silver that had meant so much to him! He flings them at the feet of his tempters. They would not take them back. He rushes out and hangs himself. Shame and death. With his own hands he will build his own cross, none to help him. He, too – even Judas, climbs his Calvary. Enters into the fellowship of those who through all ages have trod its stony pathway."

Joan waited till the last of the congregation had disappeared, and then joined the little pew-opener who was waiting to close the doors. Joan asked her what she had thought of the sermon, but Mary Stopperton, being a little deaf, had not heard it.

"It was quite good – the matter of it," Joan told her. "All Roads lead to Calvary. The idea is that there comes a time to all of us when we have to choose. Whether, like your friend Carlyle, we will 'give up things' for our faith's sake. Or go for the carriage and pair."

Mary Stopperton laughed. "He is quite right, dear," she said. "It does seem to come, and it is so hard. You have to pray and pray and pray. And even then we cannot always do it." She touched with her little withered fingers Joan's fine white hand. "But you are so strong and brave," she continued, with another little laugh. "It won't be so difficult for you."

It was not until well on her way home that Joan, recalling the conversation, found herself smiling at Mary Stopperton's literal acceptation of the argument. At the time, she remembered, the shadow of a fear had passed over her.

Mary Stopperton did not know the name of the preacher. It was quite common for chance substitutes to officiate there, especially in the evening. Joan had insisted on her acceptance of a shilling, and had made a note of her address, feeling instinctively that the little old woman would "come in useful" from a journalistic point of view.

Shaking hands with her, she had turned eastward, intending to walk to Sloane Square and there take the bus. At the corner of Oakley Street she overtook him. He was evidently a stranger to the neighbourhood, and was peering up through his glasses to see the name of the street; and Joan caught sight of his face beneath a gas lamp.

And suddenly it came to her that it was a face she knew. In the dim-lit church she had not seen him clearly. He was still peering upward. Joan stole another glance. Yes, she had met him somewhere. He was very changed, quite different, but she was sure of it. It was a long time ago. She must have been quite a child.

CHAPTER II

One of Joan's earliest recollections was the picture of herself standing before the high cheval glass in her mother's dressing-room. Her clothes lay scattered far and wide, falling where she had flung them; not a shred of any kind of covering was left to her. She must have been very small, for she could remember looking up and seeing high above her head the two brass knobs by which the glass was fastened to its frame. Suddenly, out of the upper portion of the glass, there looked a scared red face. It hovered there a moment, and over it in swift succession there passed the expressions, first of petrified amazement, secondly of shocked indignation, and thirdly of righteous wrath. And then it swooped down upon her, and the image in the glass became a confusion of small naked arms and legs mingled with green cotton gloves and purple bonnet strings.

"You young imp of Satan!" demanded Mrs. Munday – her feelings of outraged virtue exaggerating perhaps her real sentiments. "What are you doing?"

"Go away. I'se looking at myself," had explained Joan, struggling furiously to regain the glass.

"But where are your clothes?" was Mrs. Munday's wonder.

"I'se tooked them off," explained Joan. A piece of information that really, all things considered, seemed unnecessary.

"But can't you see yourself, you wicked child, without

stripping yourself as naked as you were born?"

"No," maintained Joan stoutly. "I hate clothes." As a matter of fact she didn't, even in those early days. On the contrary, one of her favourite amusements was "dressing up." This sudden overmastering desire to arrive at the truth about herself had been a new conceit.

"I wanted to see myself. Clothes ain't me," was all she would or could vouchsafe; and Mrs. Munday had shook her head, and had freely confessed that there were things beyond her and that Joan was one of them; and had succeeded, partly by force, partly by persuasion, in restoring to Joan once more the semblance of a Christian child.

It was Mrs. Munday, poor soul, who all unconsciously had planted the seeds of disbelief in Joan's mind. Mrs. Munday's God, from Joan's point of view, was a most objectionable personage. He talked a lot – or rather Mrs. Munday talked for Him – about His love for little children. But it seemed He only loved them when they were good. Joan was under no delusions about herself. If those were His terms, well, then, so far as she could see, He wasn't going to be of much use to her. Besides, if He hated naughty children, why did He make them naughty? At a moderate estimate quite half Joan's wickedness, so it seemed to Joan, came to her unbidden. Take for example that self-examination before the cheval glass. The idea had come into her mind. It had never occurred to her that it was wicked. If, as Mrs. Munday explained, it was the Devil that had whispered

it to her, then what did God mean by allowing the Devil to go about persuading little girls to do indecent things? God could do everything. Why didn't He smash the Devil? It seemed to Joan a mean trick, look at it how you would. Fancy leaving a little girl to fight the Devil all by herself. And then get angry because the Devil won! Joan came to cordially dislike Mrs. Munday's God.

Looking back it was easy enough to smile, but the agony of many nights when she had lain awake for hours battling with her childish terrors had left a burning sense of anger in Joan's heart. Poor mazed, bewildered Mrs. Munday, preaching the eternal damnation of the wicked – who had loved her, who had only thought to do her duty, the blame was not hers. But that a religion capable of inflicting such suffering upon the innocent should still be preached; maintained by the State! That its educated followers no longer believed in a physical Hell, that its more advanced clergy had entered into a conspiracy of silence on the subject was no answer. The great mass of the people were not educated. Official Christendom in every country still preached the everlasting torture of the majority of the human race as a well thought out part of the Creator's scheme. No leader had been bold enough to come forward and denounce it as an insult to his God. As one grew older, kindly mother Nature, ever seeking to ease the self-inflicted burdens of her foolish brood, gave one forgetfulness, insensibility. The condemned criminal puts the thought of the gallows away from him as long as may be: eats, and sleeps and even jokes. Man's soul grows pachydermoid. But

the children! Their sensitive brains exposed to every cruel breath. No philosophic doubt permitted to them. No learned disputation on the relationship between the literal and the allegorical for the easing of their frenzied fears. How many million tiny white-faced figures scattered over Christian Europe and America, stared out each night into a vision of black horror; how many million tiny hands clutched wildly at the bedclothes. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, if they had done their duty, would have prosecuted before now the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Of course she would go to Hell. As a special kindness some generous relative had, on Joan's seventh birthday, given her an edition of Dante's "Inferno," with illustrations by Doré. From it she was able to form some notion of what her eternity was likely to be. And God all the while up in His Heaven, surrounded by that glorious band of praise-trumpeting angels, watching her out of the corner of His eye. Her courage saved her from despair. Defiance came to her aid. Let Him send her to Hell! She was not going to pray to Him and make up to Him. He was a wicked God. Yes, He was: a cruel, wicked God. And one night she told Him so to His face.

It had been a pretty crowded day, even for so busy a sinner as little Joan. It was springtime, and they had gone into the country for her mother's health. Maybe it was the season: a stirring of the human sap, conducing to that feeling of being "too big for one's boots," as the saying is. A dangerous period of

the year. Indeed, on the principle that prevention is better than cure, Mrs. Munday had made it a custom during April and May to administer to Joan a cooling mixture; but on this occasion had unfortunately come away without it. Joan, dressed for use rather than show, and without either shoes or stockings, had stolen stealthily downstairs: something seemed to be calling to her. Silently – "like a thief in the night," to adopt Mrs. Munday's metaphor – had slipped the heavy bolts; had joined the thousand creatures of the wood – had danced and leapt and shouted; had behaved, in short, more as if she had been a Pagan nymph than a happy English child. She had regained the house unnoticed, as she thought, the Devil, no doubt, assisting her; and had hidden her wet clothes in the bottom of a mighty chest. Deceitfulness in her heart, she had greeted Mrs. Munday in sleepy tones from beneath the sheets; and before breakfast, assailed by suspicious questions, had told a deliberate lie. Later in the morning, during an argument with an active young pig who was willing enough to play at Red Riding Hood so far as eating things out of a basket was concerned, but who would not wear a night-cap, she had used a wicked word. In the afternoon she "might have killed" the farmer's only son and heir. They had had a row. In one of those sad lapses from the higher Christian standards into which Satan was always egging her, she had pushed him; and he had tumbled head over heels into the horse-pond. The reason, that instead of lying there and drowning he had got up and walked back to the house howling fit to wake the Seven Sleepers, was that God,

watching over little children, had arranged for the incident taking place on that side of the pond where it was shallow. Had the scrimmage occurred on the opposite bank, beneath which the water was much deeper, Joan in all probability would have had murder on her soul. It seemed to Joan that if God, all-powerful and all-foreseeing, had been so careful in selecting the site, He might with equal ease have prevented the row from ever taking place. Why couldn't the little beast have been guided back from school through the orchard, much the shorter way, instead of being brought round by the yard, so as to come upon her at a moment when she was feeling a bit short-tempered, to put it mildly? And why had God allowed him to call her "Carrots"? That Joan should have "put it" this way, instead of going down on her knees and thanking the Lord for having saved her from a crime, was proof of her inborn evil disposition. In the evening was reached the culminating point. Just before going to bed she had murdered old George the cowman. For all practical purposes she might just as well have been successful in drowning William Augustus earlier in the day. It seemed to be one of those things that had to be. Mr. Hornflower still lived, it was true, but that was not Joan's fault. Joan, standing in white night-gown beside her bed, everything around her breathing of innocence and virtue: the spotless bedclothes, the chintz curtains, the white hyacinths upon the window-ledge, Joan's Bible, a present from Aunt Susan; her prayer-book, handsomely bound in calf, a present from Grandpapa, upon their little table; Mrs. Munday in evening black

and cameo brooch (pale red with tomb and weeping willow in white relief) sacred to the memory of the departed Mr. Munday – Joan standing there erect, with pale, passionate face, defying all these aids to righteousness, had deliberately wished Mr. Hornflower dead. Old George Hornflower it was who, unseen by her, had passed her that morning in the wood. Grumpy old George it was who had overheard the wicked word with which she had cursed the pig; who had met William Augustus on his emergence from the pond. To Mr. George Hornflower, the humble instrument in the hands of Providence, helping her towards possible salvation, she ought to have been grateful. And instead of that she had flung into the agonized face of Mrs. Munday these awful words:

"I wish he was dead!"

"He who in his heart – " there was verse and chapter for it. Joan was a murderess. Just as well, so far as Joan was concerned, might she have taken a carving-knife and stabbed Deacon Hornflower to the heart.

Joan's prayers that night, to the accompaniment of Mrs. Munday's sobs, had a hopeless air of unreality about them. Mrs. Munday's kiss was cold.

How long Joan lay and tossed upon her little bed she could not tell. Somewhere about the middle of the night, or so it seemed to her, the frenzy seized her. Flinging the bedclothes away she rose to her feet. It is difficult to stand upon a spring mattress, but Joan kept her balance. Of course He was there in the room with

her. God was everywhere, spying upon her. She could distinctly hear His measured breathing. Face to face with Him, she told Him what she thought of Him. She told Him He was a cruel, wicked God.

There are no Victoria Crosses for sinners, or surely little Joan that night would have earned it. It was not lack of imagination that helped her courage. God and she alone, in the darkness. He with all the forces of the Universe behind Him. He armed with His eternal pains and penalties, and eight-year-old Joan: the creature that He had made in His Own Image that He could torture and destroy. Hell yawned beneath her, but it had to be said. Somebody ought to tell Him.

"You are a wicked God," Joan told Him. "Yes, You are. A cruel, wicked God."

And then that she might not see the walls of the room open before her, hear the wild laughter of the thousand devils that were coming to bear her off, she threw herself down, her face hidden in the pillow, and clenched her hands and waited.

And suddenly there burst a song. It was like nothing Joan had ever heard before. So clear and loud and near that all the night seemed filled with harmony. It sank into a tender yearning cry throbbing with passionate desire, and then it rose again in thrilling ecstasy: a song of hope, of victory.

Joan, trembling, stole from her bed and drew aside the blind. There was nothing to be seen but the stars and the dim shape of the hills. But still that song, filling the air with its wild,

triumphant melody.

Years afterwards, listening to the overture to *Tannhäuser*, there came back to her the memory of that night. Ever through the mad Satanic discords she could hear, now faint, now conquering, the Pilgrims' onward march. So through the jangled discords of the world one heard the Song of Life. Through the dim aeons of man's savage infancy; through the centuries of bloodshed and of horror; through the dark ages of tyranny and superstition; through wrong, through cruelty, through hate; heedless of doom, heedless of death, still the nightingale's song: "I love you. I love you. I love you. We will build a nest. We will rear our brood. I love you. I love you. Life shall not die."

Joan crept back into bed. A new wonder had come to her. And from that night Joan's belief in Mrs. Munday's God began to fade, circumstances helping.

Firstly there was the great event of going to school. She was glad to get away from home, a massive, stiffly furnished house in a wealthy suburb of Liverpool. Her mother, since she could remember, had been an invalid, rarely leaving her bedroom till the afternoon. Her father, the owner of large engineering works, she only saw, as a rule, at dinner-time, when she would come down to dessert. It had been different when she was very young, before her mother had been taken ill. Then she had been more with them both. She had dim recollections of her father playing with her, pretending to be a bear and growling at her from behind the sofa. And then he would seize and hug her

and they would both laugh, while he tossed her into the air and caught her. He had looked so big and handsome. All through her childhood there had been the desire to recreate those days, to spring into the air and catch her arms about his neck. She could have loved him dearly if he had only let her. Once, seeking explanation, she had opened her heart a little to Mrs. Munday. It was disappointment, Mrs. Munday thought, that she had not been a boy; and with that Joan had to content herself. Maybe also her mother's illness had helped to sadden him. Or perhaps it was mere temperament, as she argued to herself later, for which they were both responsible. Those little tricks of coaxing, of tenderness, of wilfulness, by means of which other girls wriggled their way so successfully into a warm nest of cosy affection: she had never been able to employ them. Beneath her self-confidence was a shyness, an immovable reserve that had always prevented her from expressing her emotions. She had inherited it, doubtless enough, from him. Perhaps one day, between them, they would break down the barrier, the strength of which seemed to lie in its very flimsiness, its impalpability.

And then during college vacations, returning home with growing notions and views of her own, she had found herself so often in antagonism with him. His fierce puritanism, so opposed to all her enthusiasms. Arguing with him, she might almost have been listening to one of his Cromwellian ancestors risen from the dead. There had been disputes between him and his work-people, and Joan had taken the side of the men. He had not been

angry with her, but coldly contemptuous. And yet, in spite of it all, if he had only made a sign! She wanted to fling herself crying into his arms and shake him – make him listen to her wisdom, sitting on his knee with her hands clasped round his neck. He was not really intolerant and stupid. That had been proved by his letting her go to a Church of England school. Her mother had expressed no wish. It was he who had selected it.

Of her mother she had always stood somewhat in fear, never knowing when the mood of passionate affection would give place to a chill aversion that seemed almost like hate. Perhaps it had been good for her, so she told herself in after years, her lonely, unguided childhood. It had forced her to think and act for herself. At school she reaped the benefit. Self-reliant, confident, original, leadership was granted to her as a natural prerogative. Nature had helped her. Nowhere does a young girl rule more supremely by reason of her beauty than among her fellows. Joan soon grew accustomed to having her boots put on and taken off for her; all her needs of service anticipated by eager slaves, contending with one another for the privilege. By giving a command, by bestowing a few moments of her conversation, it was within her power to make some small adoring girl absurdly happy for the rest of the day; while her displeasure would result in tears, in fawning pleadings for forgiveness. The homage did not spoil her. Rather it helped to develop her. She accepted it from the beginning as in the order of things. Power had been given to her. It was her duty to see to it that she did not use it capriciously,

for her own gratification. No conscientious youthful queen could have been more careful in the distribution of her favours – that they should be for the encouragement of the deserving, the reward of virtue; more sparing of her frowns, reserving them for the rectification of error.

At Girton it was more by force of will, of brain, that she had to make her position. There was more competition. Joan welcomed it, as giving more zest to life. But even there her beauty was by no means a negligible quantity. Clever, brilliant young women, accustomed to sweep aside all opposition with a blaze of rhetoric, found themselves to their irritation sitting in front of her silent, not so much listening to her as looking at her. It puzzled them for a time. Because a girl's features are classical and her colouring attractive, surely that has nothing to do with the value of her political views? Until one of them discovered by chance that it has.

"Well, what does Beauty think about it?" this one had asked, laughing. She had arrived at the end of a discussion just as Joan was leaving the room. And then she gave a long low whistle, feeling that she had stumbled upon the explanation. Beauty, that mysterious force that from the date of creation has ruled the world, what does It think? Dumb, passive, as a rule, exercising its influence unconsciously. But if it should become intelligent, active! A Philosopher has dreamed of the vast influence that could be exercised by a dozen sincere men acting in unity. Suppose a dozen of the most beautiful women in the world

could form themselves into a league! Joan found them late in the evening still discussing it.

Her mother died suddenly during her last term, and Joan hurried back to attend the funeral. Her father was out when she reached home. Joan changed her travel-dusty clothes, and then went into the room where her mother lay, and closed the door. She must have been a beautiful woman. Now that the fret and the restlessness had left her it had come back to her. The passionate eyes were closed. Joan kissed the marble lids, and drawing a chair to the bedside, sat down. It grieved her that she had never loved her mother – not as one ought to love one's mother, unquestioningly, unreasoningly, as a natural instinct. For a moment a strange thought came to her, and swiftly, almost guiltily, she stole across, and drawing back a corner of the blind, examined closely her own features in the glass, comparing them with the face of the dead woman, thus called upon to be a silent witness for or against the living. Joan drew a sigh of relief and let fall the blind. There could be no misreading the evidence. Death had smoothed away the lines, given back youth. It was almost uncanny, the likeness between them. It might have been her drowned sister lying there. And they had never known one another. Had this also been temperament again, keeping them apart? Why did it imprison us each one as in a moving cell, so that we never could stretch out our arms to one another, except when at rare intervals Love or Death would unlock for a while the key? Impossible that two beings should have been so alike in

feature without being more or less alike in thought and feeling. Whose fault had it been? Surely her own; she was so hideously calculating. Even Mrs. Munday, because the old lady had been fond of her and had shown it, had been of more service to her, more a companion, had been nearer to her than her own mother. In self-excuse she recalled the two or three occasions when she had tried to win her mother. But fate seemed to have decreed that their moods should never correspond. Her mother's sudden fierce outbursts of love, when she would be jealous, exacting, almost cruel, had frightened her when she was a child, and later on had bored her. Other daughters would have shown patience, unselfishness, but she had always been so self-centred. Why had she never fallen in love like other girls? There had been a boy at Brighton when she was at school there – quite a nice boy, who had written her wildly extravagant love-letters. It must have cost him half his pocket-money to get them smuggled in to her. Why had she only been amused at them? They might have been beautiful if only one had read them with sympathy. One day he had caught her alone on the Downs. Evidently he had made it his business to hang about every day waiting for some such chance. He had gone down on his knees and kissed her feet, and had been so abject, so pitiful that she had given him some flowers she was wearing. And he had sworn to dedicate the rest of his life to being worthy of her condescension. Poor lad! She wondered – for the first time since that afternoon – what had become of him. There had been others; a third cousin who still wrote to her

from Egypt, sending her presents that perhaps he could ill afford, and whom she answered about once a year. And promising young men she had met at Cambridge, ready, she felt instinctively, to fall down and worship her. And all the use she had had for them was to convert them to her views – a task so easy as to be quite uninteresting – with a vague idea that they might come in handy in the future, when she might need help in shaping that world of the future.

Only once had she ever thought of marriage. And that was in favour of a middle-aged, rheumatic widower with three children, a professor of chemistry, very learned and justly famous. For about a month she had thought herself in love. She pictured herself devoting her life to him, rubbing his poor left shoulder where it seemed he suffered most, and brushing his picturesque hair, inclined to grey. Fortunately his eldest daughter was a young woman of resource, or the poor gentleman, naturally carried off his feet by this adoration of youth and beauty, might have made an ass of himself. But apart from this one episode she had reached the age of twenty-three heart-whole.

She rose and replaced the chair. And suddenly a wave of pity passed over her for the dead woman, who had always seemed so lonely in the great stiffly-furnished house, and the tears came.

She was glad she had been able to cry. She had always hated herself for her lack of tears; it was so unwomanly. Even as a child she had rarely cried.

Her father had always been very tender, very patient towards

her mother, but she had not expected to find him so changed. He had aged and his shoulders drooped. She had been afraid that he would want her to stay with him and take charge of the house. It had worried her considerably. It would be so difficult to refuse, and yet she would have to. But when he never broached the subject she was hurt. He had questioned her about her plans the day after the funeral, and had seemed only anxious to assist them. She proposed continuing at Cambridge till the end of the term. She had taken her degree the year before. After that, she would go to London and commence her work.

"Let me know what allowance you would like me to make you, when you have thought it out. Things are not what they were at the works, but there will always be enough to keep you in comfort," he had told her. She had fixed it there and then at two hundred a year. She would not take more, and that only until she was in a position to keep herself.

"I want to prove to myself," she explained, "that I am capable of earning my own living. I am going down into the market-place. If I'm no good, if I can't take care of even one poor woman, I'll come back and ask you to keep me." She was sitting on the arm of his chair, and laughing, she drew his head towards her and pressed it against her. "If I succeed, if I am strong enough to fight the world for myself and win, that will mean I am strong enough and clever enough to help others."

"I am only at the end of a journey when you need me," he had answered, and they had kissed. And next morning she returned

to her own life.

CHAPTER III

It was at Madge Singleton's rooms that the details of Joan's entry into journalistic London were arranged. "The Coming of Beauty," was Flora Lessing's phrase for designating the event. Flora Lessing, known among her associates as "Flossie," was the girl who at Cambridge had accidentally stumbled upon the explanation of Joan's influence. In appearance she was of the Fluffy Ruffles type, with childish innocent eyes, and the "unruly curls" beloved of the *Family Herald* novelist. At the first, these latter had been the result of a habit of late rising and consequent hurried toilet operations; but on the discovery that for the purposes of her profession they possessed a market value they had been sedulously cultivated. Editors of the old order had ridiculed the idea of her being of any use to them, when two years previously she had, by combination of cheek and patience, forced herself into their sanctum; had patted her paternally upon her generally ungloved hand, and told her to go back home and get some honest, worthy young man to love and cherish her.

It was Carleton of the *Daily Dispatch* group who had first divined her possibilities. With a swift glance on his way through, he had picked her out from a line of depressed-looking men and women ranged against the wall of the dark entrance passage; and with a snap of his fingers had beckoned to her to follow him. Striding in front of her up to his room, he had pointed

to a chair and had left her sitting there for three-quarters of an hour, while he held discussion with a stream of subordinates, managers and editors of departments, who entered and departed one after another, evidently in pre-arranged order. All of them spoke rapidly, without ever digressing by a single word from the point, giving her the impression of their speeches having been rehearsed beforehand.

Carleton himself never interrupted them. Indeed, one might have thought he was not listening, so engrossed he appeared to be in the pile of letters and telegrams that lay waiting for him on his desk. When they had finished he would ask them questions, still with his attention fixed apparently upon the paper in his hand. Then, looking up for the first time, he would run off curt instructions, much in the tone of a Commander-in-Chief giving orders for an immediate assault; and, finishing abruptly, return to his correspondence. When the last, as it transpired, had closed the door behind him, he swung his chair round and faced her.

"What have you been doing?" he asked her.

"Wasting my time and money hanging about newspaper offices, listening to silly talk from old fossils," she told him.

"And having learned that respectable journalism has no use for brains, you come to me," he answered her. "What do you think you can do?"

"Anything that can be done with a pen and ink," she told him.

"Interviewing?" he suggested.

"I've always been considered good at asking awkward

questions," she assured him.

He glanced at the clock. "I'll give you five minutes," he said. "Interview me."

She moved to a chair beside the desk, and, opening her bag, took out a writing-block.

"What are your principles?" she asked him. "Have you got any?"

He looked at her sharply across the corner of the desk.

"I mean," she continued, "to what fundamental rule of conduct do you attribute your success?"

She leant forward, fixing her eyes on him. "Don't tell me," she persisted, "that you had none. That life is all just mere blind chance. Think of the young men who are hanging on your answer. Won't you send them a message?"

"Yes," he answered musingly. "It's your baby face that does the trick. In the ordinary way I should have known you were pulling my leg, and have shown you the door. As it was, I felt half inclined for the moment to reply with some damned silly platitude that would have set all Fleet Street laughing at me. Why do my 'principles' interest you?"

"As a matter of fact they don't," she explained. "But it's what people talk about whenever they discuss you."

"What do they say?" he demanded.

"Your friends, that you never had any. And your enemies, that they are always the latest," she informed him.

"You'll do," he answered with a laugh. "With nine men out of

ten that speech would have ended your chances. You sized me up at a glance, and knew it would only interest me. And your instinct is right," he added. "What people are saying: always go straight for that."

He gave her a commission then and there for a heart to heart talk with a gentleman whom the editor of the Home News Department of the *Daily Dispatch* would have referred to as a "Leading Literary Luminary," and who had just invented a new world in two volumes. She had asked him childish questions and had listened with wide-open eyes while he, sitting over against her, and smiling benevolently, had laid bare to her all the seeming intricacies of creation, and had explained to her in simple language the necessary alterations and improvements he was hoping to bring about in human nature. He had the sensation that his hair must be standing on end the next morning after having read in cold print what he had said. Expanding oneself before the admiring gaze of innocent simplicity and addressing the easily amused ear of an unsympathetic public are not the same thing. He ought to have thought of that.

It consoled him, later, that he was not the only victim. The *Daily Dispatch* became famous for its piquant interviews; especially with elderly celebrities of the masculine gender.

"It's dirty work," Flossie confided one day to Madge Singleton. "I trade on my silly face. Don't see that I'm much different to any of these poor devils." They were walking home in the evening from a theatre. "If I hadn't been stony broke I'd never

have taken it up. I shall get out of it as soon as I can afford to."

"I should make it a bit sooner than that," suggested the elder woman. "One can't always stop oneself just where one wants to when sliding down a slope. It has a knack of getting steeper and steeper as one goes on."

Madge had asked Joan to come a little earlier so that they could have a chat together before the others arrived.

"I've only asked a few," she explained, as she led Joan into the restful white-panelled sitting-room that looked out upon the gardens. Madge shared a set of chambers in Gray's Inn with her brother who was an actor. "But I have chosen them with care."

Joan murmured her thanks.

"I haven't asked any men," she added, as she fixed Joan in an easy chair before the fire. "I was afraid of its introducing the wrong element."

"Tell me," asked Joan, "am I likely to meet with much of that sort of thing?"

"Oh, about as much as there always is wherever men and women work together," answered Madge. "It's a nuisance, but it has to be faced."

"Nature appears to have only one idea in her head," she continued after a pause, "so far as we men and women are concerned. She's been kinder to the lower animals."

"Man has more interests," Joan argued, "a thousand other allurements to distract him; we must cultivate his finer instincts."

"It doesn't seem to answer," grumbled Madge. "One is always

told it is the artist – the brain worker, the very men who have these fine instincts, who are the most sexual."

She made a little impatient movement with her hands that was characteristic of her. "Personally, I like men," she went on. "It is so splendid the way they enjoy life: just like a dog does, whether it's wet or fine. We are always blinking up at the clouds and worrying about our hat. It would be so nice to be able to have friendship with them.

"I don't mean that it's all their fault," she continued. "We do all we can to attract them – the way we dress. Who was it said that to every woman every man is a potential lover. We can't get it out of our minds. It's there even when we don't know it. We will never succeed in civilizing Nature."

"We won't despair of her," laughed Joan. "She's creeping up, poor lady, as Whistler said of her. We have passed the phase when everything she did was right in our childish eyes. Now we dare to criticize her. That shows we are growing up. She will learn from us, later on. She's a dear old thing, at heart."

"She's been kind enough to you," replied Madge, somewhat irrelevantly. There was a note of irritation in her tone. "I suppose you know you are supremely beautiful. You seem so indifferent to it, I wonder sometimes if you do."

"I'm not indifferent to it," answered Joan. "I'm reckoning on it to help me."

"Why not?" she continued, with a flash of defiance, though Madge had not spoken. "It is a weapon like any other –

knowledge, intellect, courage. God has given me beauty. I shall use it in His service."

They formed a curious physical contrast, these two women in this moment. Joan, radiant, serene, sat upright in her chair, her head slightly thrown back, her fine hands clasping one another so strongly that the delicate muscles could be traced beneath the smooth white skin. Madge, with puckered brows, leant forward in a crouching attitude, her thin nervous hands stretched out towards the fire.

"How does one know when one is serving God?" she asked after a pause, apparently rather of herself than of Joan. "It seems so difficult."

"One feels it," explained Joan.

"Yes, but didn't they all feel it," Madge suggested. She still seemed to be arguing with herself rather than with Joan. "Nietzsche. I have been reading him. They are forming a Nietzsche Society to give lectures about him – propagate him over here. Eleanor's in it up to the neck. It seems to me awful. Every fibre in my being revolts against him. Yet they're all cocksure that he is the coming prophet. He must have convinced himself that he is serving God. If I were a fighter I should feel I was serving God trying to down Him. How do I know which of us is right? Torquemada – Calvin," she went on, without giving Joan the chance of a reply. "It's easy enough to see they were wrong now. But at the time millions of people believed in them – felt it was God's voice speaking through them. Joan of Arc!

Fancy dying to put a thing like that upon a throne. It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic. You can say she drove out the English – saved France. But for what? The Bartholomew massacres. The ruin of the Palatinate by Louis XIV. The horrors of the French Revolution, ending with Napoleon and all the misery and degeneracy that he bequeathed to Europe. History might have worked itself out so much better if the poor child had left it alone and minded her sheep."

"Wouldn't that train of argument lead to nobody ever doing anything?" suggested Joan.

"I suppose it would mean stagnation," admitted Madge. "And yet I don't know. Are there not forces moving towards right that are crying to us to help them, not by violence, which only interrupts – delays them, but by quietly preparing the way for them? You know what I mean. Erasmus always said that Luther had hindered the Reformation by stirring up passion and hate." She broke off suddenly. There were tears in her eyes. "Oh, if God would only say what He wants of us," she almost cried; "call to us in trumpet tones that would ring through the world, compelling us to take sides. Why can't He speak?"

"He does," answered Joan. "I hear His voice. There are things I've got to do. Wrongs that I must fight against. Rights that I must never dare to rest till they are won." Her lips were parted. Her breasts heaving. "He does call to us. He has girded His sword upon me."

Madge looked at her in silence for quite a while. "How

confident you are," she said. "How I envy you."

They talked for a time about domestic matters. Joan had established herself in furnished rooms in a quiet street of pleasant Georgian houses just behind the Abbey; a member of Parliament and his wife occupied the lower floors, the landlord, a retired butler, and his wife, an excellent cook, confining themselves to the basement and the attics. The remaining floor was tenanted by a shy young man – a poet, so the landlady thought, but was not sure. Anyhow he had long hair, lived with a pipe in his mouth, and burned his lamp long into the night. Joan had omitted to ask his name. She made a note to do so.

They discussed ways and means. Joan calculated she could get through on two hundred a year, putting aside fifty for dress. Madge was doubtful if this would be sufficient. Joan urged that she was "stock size" and would be able to pick up "models" at sales; but Madge, measuring her against herself, was sure she was too full.

"You will find yourself expensive to dress," she told her, "cheap things won't go well on you; and it would be madness, even from a business point of view, for you not to make the best of yourself."

"Men stand more in awe of a well-dressed woman than they do even of a beautiful woman," Madge was of opinion. "If you go into an office looking dowdy they'll beat you down. Tell them the price they are offering you won't keep you in gloves for a week and they'll be ashamed of themselves. There's nothing *infra dig*.

in being mean to the poor; but not to sympathize with the rich stamps you as middle class." She laughed.

Joan was worried. "I told Dad I should only ask him for enough to make up two hundred a year," she explained. "He'll laugh at me for not knowing my own mind."

"I should let him," advised Madge. She grew thoughtful again. "We cranky young women, with our new-fangled, independent ways, I guess we hurt the old folks quite enough as it is."

The bell rang and Madge opened the door herself. It turned out to be Flossie. Joan had not seen her since they had been at Girton together, and was surprised at Flossie's youthful "get up." Flossie explained, and without waiting for any possible attack flew to her own defence.

"The revolution that the world is waiting for," was Flossie's opinion, "is the providing of every man and woman with a hundred and fifty a year. Then we shall all be able to afford to be noble and high-minded. As it is, nine-tenths of the contemptible things we do comes from the necessity of our having to earn our living. A hundred and fifty a year would deliver us from evil."

"Would there not still be the diamond dog-collar and the motor car left to tempt us?" suggested Madge.

"Only the really wicked," contended Flossie. "It would classify us. We should know then which were the sheep and which the goats. At present we're all jumbled together: the ungodly who sin out of mere greed and rapacity, and the just men compelled to sell their birthright of fine instincts for a mess of meat and

potatoes."

"Yah, socialist," commented Madge, who was busy with the tea things.

Flossie seemed struck by an idea.

"By Jove," she exclaimed. "Why did I never think of it. With a red flag and my hair down, I'd be in all the illustrated papers. It would put up my price no end. And I'd be able to get out of this silly job of mine. I can't go on much longer. I'm getting too well known. I do believe I'll try it. The shouting's easy enough." She turned to Joan. "Are you going to take up socialism?" she demanded.

"I may," answered Joan. "Just to spank it, and put it down again. I'm rather a believer in temptation – the struggle for existence. I only want to make it a finer existence, more worth the struggle, in which the best man shall rise to the top. Your 'universal security' – that will be the last act of the human drama, the cue for ringing down the curtain."

"But do not all our Isms work towards that end?" suggested Madge.

Joan was about to reply when the maid's announcement of "Mrs. Denton" postponed the discussion.

Mrs. Denton was a short, grey-haired lady. Her large strong features must have made her, when she was young, a hard-looking woman; but time and sorrow had strangely softened them; while about the corners of the thin firm mouth lurked a suggestion of humour that possibly had not always been there.

Joan, waiting to be introduced, towered head and shoulders above her; yet when she took the small proffered hand and felt those steely blue eyes surveying her, she had the sensation of being quite insignificant. Mrs. Denton seemed to be reading her, and then still retaining Joan's hand she turned to Madge with a smile.

"So this is our new recruit," she said. "She is come to bring healing to the sad, sick world – to right all the old, old wrongs."

She patted Joan's hand and spoke gravely. "That is right, dear. That is youth's *métier*; to take the banner from our failing hands, bear it still a little onward." Her small gloved hand closed on Joan's with a pressure that made Joan wince.

"And you must not despair," she continued; "because in the end it will seem to you that you have failed. It is the fallen that win the victories."

She released Joan's hand abruptly. "Come and see me to-morrow morning at my office," she said. "We will fix up something that shall be serviceable to us both."

Madge flashed Joan a look. She considered Joan's position already secured. Mrs. Denton was the doyen of women journalists. She edited a monthly review and was leader writer of one of the most important dailies, besides being the controlling spirit of various social movements. Anyone she "took up" would be assured of steady work. The pay might not be able to compete with the prices paid for more popular journalism, but it would afford a foundation, and give to Joan that opportunity for

influence which was her main ambition.

Joan expressed her thanks. She would like to have had more talk with the stern old lady, but was prevented by the entrance of two new comers. The first was Miss Lavery, a handsome, loud-toned young woman. She ran a nursing paper, but her chief interest was in the woman's suffrage question, just then coming rapidly to the front. She had heard Joan speak at Cambridge and was eager to secure her adherence, being wishful to surround herself with a group of young and good-looking women who should take the movement out of the hands of the "frumps," as she termed them. Her doubt was whether Joan would prove sufficiently tractable. She intended to offer her remunerative work upon the *Nursing News* without saying anything about the real motive behind, trusting to gratitude to make her task the easier.

The second was a clumsy-looking, overdressed woman whom Miss Lavery introduced as "Mrs. Phillips, a very dear friend of mine, who is going to be helpful to us all," adding in a hurried aside to Madge, "I simply had to bring her. Will explain to you another time." An apology certainly seemed to be needed. The woman was absurdly out of her place. She stood there panting and slightly perspiring. She was short and fat, with dyed hair. As a girl she had possibly been pretty in a dimpled, giggling sort of way. Joan judged her, in spite of her complexion, to be about forty.

Joan wondered if she could be the wife of the Member of

Parliament who occupied the rooms below her in Cowley Street. His name, so the landlady had told her, was Phillips. She put the suggestion in a whisper to Flossie.

"Quite likely," thought Flossie; "just the type that sort of man does marry. A barmaid, I expect."

Others continued to arrive until altogether there must have been about a dozen women present. One of them turned out to be an old schoolfellow of Joan's and two had been with her at Girton. Madge had selected those who she knew would be sympathetic, and all promised help: those who could not give it direct undertaking to provide introductions and recommendations, though some of them were frankly doubtful of journalism affording Joan anything more than the means – not always too honest – of earning a living.

"I started out to preach the gospel: all that sort of thing," drawled a Miss Simmonds from beneath a hat that, if she had paid for it, would have cost her five guineas. "Now my chief purpose in life is to tickle silly women into spending twice as much upon their clothes as their husbands can afford, bamboozling them into buying any old thing that our Advertising Manager instructs me to boom."

"They talk about the editor's opinions," struck in a fiery little woman who was busy flinging crumbs out of the window to a crowd of noisy sparrows. "It's the Advertiser edits half the papers. Write anything that three of them object to, and your proprietor tells you to change your convictions or go. Most of us

change." She jerked down the window with a slam.

"It's the syndicates that have done it," was a Mrs. Elliot's opinion. She wrote "Society Notes" for a Labour weekly. "When one man owned a paper he wanted it to express his views. A company is only out for profit. Your modern newspaper is just a shop. It's only purpose is to attract customers. Look at the *Methodist Herald*, owned by the same syndicate of Jews that runs the *Racing News*. They work it as far as possible with the same staff."

"We're a pack of hirelings," asserted the fiery little woman. "Our pens are for sale to the highest bidder. I had a letter from Jocelyn only two days ago. He was one of the original staff of the *Socialist*. He writes me that he has gone as leader writer to a Conservative paper at twice his former salary. Expected me to congratulate him."

"One of these days somebody will start a Society for the Reformation of the Press," thought Flossie. "I wonder how the papers will take it?"

"Much as Rome took Savonarola," thought Madge.

Mrs. Denton had risen.

"They are right to a great extent," she said to Joan. "But not all the temple has been given over to the hucksters. You shall place your preaching stool in some quiet corner, where the passing feet shall pause awhile to listen."

Her going was the signal for the breaking up of the party. In a short time Joan and Madge found themselves left with only

Flossie.

"What on earth induced Helen to bring that poor old Dutch doll along with her?" demanded Flossie. "The woman never opened her mouth all the time. Did she tell you?"

"No," answered Madge, "but I think I can guess. She hopes – or perhaps 'fears' would be more correct – that her husband is going to join the Cabinet, and is trying to fit herself by suddenly studying political and social questions. For a month she's been clinging like a leech to Helen Lavery, who takes her to meetings and gatherings. I suppose they've struck up some sort of a bargain. It's rather pathetic."

"Good Heavens! What a tragedy for the man," commented Flossie.

"What is he like?" asked Joan.

"Not much to look at, if that's what you mean," answered Madge. "Began life as a miner, I believe. Looks like ending as Prime Minister."

"I heard him at the Albert Hall last week," said Flossie. "He's quite wonderful."

"In what way?" questioned Joan.

"Oh, you know," explained Flossie. "Like a volcano compressed into a steam engine."

They discussed Joan's plans. It looked as if things were going to be easy for her.

CHAPTER IV

Yet in the end it was Carleton who opened the door for her.

Mrs. Denton was helpful, and would have been more so, if Joan had only understood. Mrs. Denton lived alone in an old house in Gower Street, with a high stone hall that was always echoing to sounds that no one but itself could ever hear. Her son had settled, it was supposed, in one of the Colonies. No one knew what had become of him, and Mrs. Denton herself never spoke of him; while her daughter, on whom she had centred all her remaining hopes, had died years ago. To those who remembered the girl, with her weak eyes and wispy ginger coloured hair, it would have seemed comical, the idea that Joan resembled her. But Mrs. Denton's memory had lost itself in dreams; and to her the likeness had appeared quite wonderful. The gods had given her child back to her, grown strong and brave and clever. Life would have a new meaning for her. Her work would not die with her.

She thought she could harness Joan's enthusiasm to her own wisdom. She would warn her of the errors and pitfalls into which she herself had fallen: for she, too, had started as a rebel. Youth should begin where age left off. Had the old lady remembered a faded dogs-eared volume labelled "Oddments" that for many years had rested undisturbed upon its shelf in her great library, and opening it had turned to the letter E, she would have read

recorded there, in her own precise thin penmanship, this very wise reflection:

"Experience is a book that all men write, but no man reads."

To which she would have found added, by way of complement, "Experience is untranslatable. We write it in the cipher of our sufferings, and the key is hidden in our memories."

And turning to the letter Y, she might have read:

"Youth comes to teach. Age remains to listen," and underneath the following:

"The ability to learn is the last lesson we acquire."

Mrs. Denton had long ago given up the practice of jotting down her thoughts, experience having taught her that so often, when one comes to use them, one finds that one has changed them. But in the case of Joan the recollection of these twin "oddments" might have saved her disappointment. Joan knew of a new road that avoided Mrs. Denton's pitfalls. She grew impatient of being perpetually pulled back.

For the *Nursing Times* she wrote a series of condensed biographies, entitled "Ladies of the Lamp," commencing with Elizabeth Fry. They formed a record of good women who had battled for the weak and suffering, winning justice for even the uninteresting. Miss Lavery was delighted with them. But when Joan proposed exposing the neglect and even cruelty too often inflicted upon the helpless patients of private Nursing Homes, Miss Lavery shook her head.

"I know," she said. "One does hear complaints about them.

Unfortunately it is one of the few businesses managed entirely by women; and just now, in particular, if we were to say anything, it would be made use of by our enemies to injure the Cause."

There was a summer years ago – it came back to Joan's mind – when she had shared lodgings with a girl chum at a crowded sea-side watering-place. The rooms were shockingly dirty; and tired of dropping hints she determined one morning to clean them herself. She climbed a chair and started on a row of shelves where lay the dust of ages. It was a jerry-built house, and the result was that she brought the whole lot down about her head, together with a quarter of a hundred-weight of plaster.

"Yes, I thought you'd do some mischief," had commented the landlady, wearily.

It seemed typical. A jerry-built world, apparently. With the best intentions it seemed impossible to move in it without doing more harm than good to it, bringing things down about one that one had not intended.

She wanted to abolish steel rabbit-traps. She had heard the little beggars cry. It had struck her as such a harmless reform. But they told her there were worthy people in the neighbourhood of Wolverhampton – quite a number of them – who made their living by the manufacture of steel rabbit-traps. If, thinking only of the rabbits, you prohibited steel rabbit-traps, then you condemned all these worthy people to slow starvation. The local Mayor himself wrote in answer to her article. He drew a moving picture of the sad results that might follow such an ill-considered

agitation: hundreds of grey-haired men, too old to learn new jobs, begging from door to door; shoals of little children, white-faced and pinched; sobbing women. Her editor was sorry for the rabbits. Had often spent a pleasant day with them himself. But, after all, the Human Race claimed our first sympathies.

She wanted to abolish sweating. She had climbed the rotting stairways, seen the famished creatures in their holes. But it seemed that if you interfered with the complicated system based on sweating then you dislocated the entire structure of the British export clothing trade. Not only would these poor creatures lose their admittedly wretched living – but still a living – but thousands of other innocent victims would also be involved in the common ruin. All very sad, but half a loaf – or even let us frankly say a thin slice – is better than no bread at all.

She wanted board school children's heads examined. She had examined one or two herself. It seemed to her wrong that healthy children should be compelled to sit for hours within jumping distance of the diseased. She thought it better that the dirty should be made fit company for the clean than the clean should be brought down to the level of the dirty. It seemed that in doing this you were destroying the independence of the poor. Opposition reformers, in letters scintillating with paradox, bristling with classical allusion, denounced her attempt to impose middle-class ideals upon a too long suffering proletariat. Better far a few lively little heads than a broken-spirited people robbed of their parental rights.

Through Miss Lavery she obtained an introduction to the great Sir William. He owned a group of popular provincial newspapers, and was most encouraging. Sir William had often said to himself:

"What can I do for God who has done so much for me?" It seemed only fair.

He asked her down to his "little place in Hampshire," to talk plans over. The "little place," it turned out, ran to forty bedrooms, and was surrounded by three hundred acres of park. God had evidently done his bit quite handsomely.

It was in a secluded corner of the park that Sir William had gone down upon one knee and gallantly kissed her hand. His idea was that if she could regard herself as his "Dear Lady," and allow him the honour and privilege of being her "True Knight," that, between them, they might accomplish something really useful. There had been some difficulty about his getting up again, Sir William being an elderly gentleman subject to rheumatism, and Joan had had to expend no small amount of muscular effort in assisting him; so that the episode which should have been symbolical ended by leaving them both red and breathless.

He referred to the matter again the same evening in the library while Lady William slept peacefully in the blue drawing-room; but as it appeared necessary that the compact should be sealed by a knightly kiss Joan had failed to ratify it.

She blamed herself on her way home. The poor old gentleman could easily have been kept in his place. The suffering of an

occasional harmless caress would have purchased for her power and opportunity. Had it not been somewhat selfish of her? Should she write to him – see him again?

She knew that she never would. It was something apart from her reason. It would not even listen to her. It bade or forbade as if one were a child without any right to a will of one's own. It was decidedly exasperating.

There were others. There were the editors who frankly told her that the business of a newspaper was to write what its customers wanted to read; and that the public, so far as they could judge, was just about fed up with plans for New Jerusalems at their expense. And the editors who were prepared to take up any number of reforms, insisting only that they should be new and original and promise popularity.

And then she met Greyson.

It was at a lunch given by Mrs. Denton. Greyson was a bachelor and lived with an unmarried sister, a few years older than himself. He was editor and part proprietor of an evening paper. It had ideals and was, in consequence, regarded by the general public with suspicion; but by reason of sincerity and braininess was rapidly becoming a power. He was a shy, reserved man with an aristocratic head set upon stooping shoulders. The face was that of a dreamer, but about the mouth there was suggestion of the fighter. Joan felt at her ease with him in spite of the air of detachment that seemed part of his character. Mrs. Denton had paired them off together; and, during the lunch, one

of them – Joan could not remember which – had introduced the subject of reincarnation.

Greyson was unable to accept the theory because of the fact that, in old age, the mind in common with the body is subject to decay.

"Perhaps by the time I am forty – or let us say fifty," he argued, "I shall be a bright, intelligent being. If I die then, well and good. I select a likely baby and go straight on. But suppose I hang about till eighty and die a childish old gentleman with a mind all gone to seed. What am I going to do then? I shall have to begin all over again: perhaps worse off than I was before. That's not going to help us much."

Joan explained it to him: that old age might be likened to an illness. A genius lies upon a bed of sickness and babbles childish nonsense. But with returning life he regains his power, goes on increasing it. The mind, the soul, has not decayed. It is the lines of communication that old age has destroyed.

"But surely you don't believe it?" he demanded.

"Why not?" laughed Joan. "All things are possible. It was the possession of a hand that transformed monkeys into men. We used to take things up, you know, and look at them, and wonder and wonder and wonder, till at last there was born a thought and the world became visible. It is curiosity that will lead us to the next great discovery. We must take things up; and think and think and think till one day there will come knowledge, and we shall see the universe."

Joan always avoided getting excited when she thought of it.

"I love to make you excited," Flossie had once confessed to her in the old student days. "You look so ridiculously young and you are so pleased with yourself, laying down the law."

She did not know she had given way to it. He was leaning back in his chair, looking at her; and the tired look she had noticed in his eyes, when she had been introduced to him in the drawing-room, had gone out of them.

During the coffee, Mrs. Denton beckoned him to come to her; and Miss Greyson crossed over and took his vacant chair. She had been sitting opposite to them.

"I've been hearing so much about you," she said. "I can't help thinking that you ought to suit my brother's paper. He has all your ideas. Have you anything that you could send him?"

Joan considered a moment.

"Nothing very startling," she answered. "I was thinking of a series of articles on the old London Churches – touching upon the people connected with them and the things they stood for. I've just finished the first one."

"It ought to be the very thing," answered Miss Greyson. She was a thin, faded woman with a soft, plaintive voice. "It will enable him to judge your style. He's particular about that. Though I'm confident he'll like it," she hastened to add. "Address it to me, will you. I assist him as much as I can."

Joan added a few finishing touches that evening, and posted it; and a day or two later received a note asking her to call at the

office.

"My sister is enthusiastic about your article on Chelsea Church and insists on my taking the whole series," Greyson informed her. "She says you have the Stevensonian touch."

Joan flushed with pleasure.

"And you," she asked, "did you think it had the Stevensonian touch?"

"No," he answered, "it seemed to me to have more of your touch."

"What's that like?" she demanded.

"They couldn't suppress you," he explained. "Sir Thomas More with his head under his arm, bloody old Bluebeard, grim Queen Bess, snarling old Swift, Pope, Addison, Carlyle – the whole grisly crowd of them! I could see you holding your own against them all, explaining things to them, getting excited." He laughed.

His sister joined them, coming in from the next room. She had a proposal to make. It was that Joan should take over the weekly letter from "Clorinda." It was supposed to give the views of a – perhaps unusually – sane and thoughtful woman upon the questions of the day. Miss Greyson had hitherto conducted it herself, but was wishful as she explained to be relieved of it; so that she might have more time for home affairs. It would necessitate Joan's frequent attendance at the office; for there would be letters from the public to be answered, and points to be discussed with her brother. She was standing behind his chair

with her hands upon his head. There was something strangely motherly about her whole attitude.

Greyson was surprised, for the Letter had been her own conception, and had grown into a popular feature. But she was evidently in earnest; and Joan accepted willingly. "Clorinda" grew younger, more self-assertive; on the whole more human. But still so eminently "sane" and reasonable.

"We must not forget that she is quite a respectable lady, connected – according to her own account – with the higher political circles," Joan's editor would insist, with a laugh.

Miss Greyson, working in the adjoining room, would raise her head and listen. She loved to hear him laugh.

"It's absurd," Flossie told her one morning, as having met by chance they were walking home together along the Embankment. "You're not 'Clorinda'; you ought to be writing letters to her, not from her, waking her up, telling her to come off her perch, and find out what the earth feels like. I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll trot you round to Carleton. If you're out for stirring up strife and contention, well, that's his game, too. He'll use you for his beastly sordid ends. He'd have roped in John the Baptist if he'd been running the 'Jerusalem Star' at the time, and have given him a daily column for so long as the boom lasted. What's that matter, if he's willing to give you a start?"

Joan jibbed at first. But in the end Flossie's arguments prevailed. One afternoon, a week later, she was shown into Carleton's private room, and the door closed behind her. The

light was dim, and for a moment she could see no one; until Carleton, who had been standing near one of the windows, came forward and placed a chair for her. And they both sat down.

"I've glanced through some of your things," he said. "They're all right. They're alive. What's your idea?"

Remembering Flossie's counsel, she went straight to the point. She wanted to talk to the people. She wanted to get at them. If she had been a man, she would have taken a chair and gone to Hyde Park. As it was, she hadn't the nerve for Hyde Park. At least she was afraid she hadn't. It might have to come to that. There was a trembling in her voice that annoyed her. She was so afraid she might cry. She wasn't out for anything crazy. She wanted only those things done that could be done if the people would but lift their eyes, look into one another's faces, see the wrong and the injustice that was all around them, and swear that they would never rest till the pain and the terror had been driven from the land. She wanted soldiers – men and women who would forget their own sweet selves, not counting their own loss, thinking of the greater gain; as in times of war and revolution, when men gave even their lives gladly for a dream, for a hope —

Without warning he switched on the electric lamp that stood upon the desk, causing her to draw back with a start.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead. You shall have your tub, and a weekly audience of a million readers for as long as you can keep them interested. Up with anything you like, and down with everything you don't. Be careful not to land me in a libel suit.

Call the whole Bench of Bishops hypocrites, and all the ground landlords thieves, if you will: but don't mention names. And don't get me into trouble with the police. Beyond that, I shan't interfere with you."

She was about to speak.

"One stipulation," he went on, "that every article is headed with your photograph."

He read the sudden dismay in her eyes.

"How else do you think you are going to attract their attention?" he asked her. "By your eloquence! Hundreds of men and women as eloquent as you could ever be are shouting to them every day. Who takes any notice of them? Why should they listen any the more to you – another cranky highbrow: some old maid, most likely, with a bony throat and a beaky nose. If Woman is going to come into the fight she will have to use her own weapons. If she is prepared to do that she'll make things hum with a vengeance. She's the biggest force going, if she only knew it."

He had risen and was pacing the room.

"The advertiser has found that out, and is showing the way." He snatched at an illustrated magazine, fresh from the press, that had been placed upon his desk, and opened it at the first page. "Johnson's Blacking," he read out, "advertised by a dainty little minx, showing her ankles. Who's going to stop for a moment to read about somebody's blacking? If a saucy little minx isn't there to trip him up with her ankles!"

He turned another page. “Do you suffer from gout? Classical lady preparing to take a bath and very nearly ready. The old Johnny in the train stops to look at her. Reads the advertisement because she seems to want him to. Rubber heels. Save your boot leather! Lady in evening dress – jolly pretty shoulders – waves them in front of your eyes. Otherwise you’d never think of them.”

He fluttered the pages. Then flung the thing across to her.

“Look at it,” he said. “Fountain pens – Corn plasters – Charitable appeals – Motor cars – Soaps – Grand pianos. It’s the girl in tights and spangles outside the show that brings them trooping in.”

“Let them see you,” he continued. “You say you want soldiers. Throw off your veil and call for them. Your namesake of France! Do you think if she had contented herself with writing stirring appeals that Orleans would have fallen? She put on a becoming suit of armour and got upon a horse where everyone could see her. Chivalry isn’t dead. You modern women are ashamed of yourselves – ashamed of your sex. You don’t give it a chance. Revive it. Stir the young men’s blood. Their souls will follow.”

He reseated himself and leant across towards her.

“I’m not talking business,” he said. “This thing’s not going to mean much to me one way or the other. I want you to win. Farm labourers bringing up families on twelve and six a week. Shirt hands working half into the night for three farthings an hour. Stinking dens for men to live in. Degraded women. Half fed children. It’s damnable. Tell them it’s got to stop. That the

Eternal Feminine has stepped out of the poster and commands it."

A dapper young man opened the door and put his head into the room.

"Railway smash in Yorkshire," he announced.

Carleton sat up. "Much of a one?" he asked.

The dapper gentleman shrugged his shoulders. "Three killed, eight injured, so far," he answered.

Carleton's interest appeared to collapse.

"Stop press column?" asked the dapper gentleman.

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Carleton. "Unless something better turns up."

The dapper young gentleman disappeared. Joan had risen.

"May I talk it over with a friend?" she asked. "Myself, I'm inclined to accept."

"You will, if you're in earnest," he answered. "I'll give you twenty-four hours. Look in to-morrow afternoon, and see Finch. It will be for the *Sunday Post*– the Inset. We use surfaced paper for that and can do you justice. Finch will arrange about the photograph." He held out his hand. "Shall be seeing you again," he said.

It was but a stone's throw to the office of the *Evening Gazette*. She caught Greyson just as he was leaving and put the thing before him. His sister was with him.

He did not answer at first. He was walking to and fro; and, catching his foot in the waste paper basket, he kicked it savagely

out of his way, so that the contents were scattered over the room.

"Yes, he's right," he said. "It was the Virgin above the altar that popularized Christianity. Her face has always been woman's fortune. If she's going to become a fighter, it will have to be her weapon."

He had used almost the same words that Carleton had used.

"I so want them to listen to me," she said. "After all, it's only like having a very loud voice."

He looked at her and smiled. "Yes," he said, "it's a voice men will listen to."

Mary Greyson was standing by the fire. She had not spoken hitherto.

"You won't give up 'Clorinda'?" she asked.

Joan had intended to do so, but something in Mary's voice caused her, against her will, to change her mind.

"Of course not," she answered. "I shall run them both. It will be like writing Jekyll and Hyde."

"What will you sign yourself?" he asked.

"My own name, I think," she said. "Joan Allway."

Miss Greyson suggested her coming home to dinner with them; but Joan found an excuse. She wanted to be alone.

CHAPTER V

The twilight was fading as she left the office. She turned northward, choosing a broad, ill-lighted road. It did not matter which way she took. She wanted to think; or, rather, to dream.

It would all fall out as she had intended. She would commence by becoming a power in journalism. She was reconciled now to the photograph idea – was even keen on it herself. She would be taken full face so that she would be looking straight into the eyes of her readers as she talked to them. It would compel her to be herself; just a hopeful, loving woman: a little better educated than the majority, having had greater opportunity: a little further seeing, maybe, having had more leisure for thought: but otherwise, no whit superior to any other young, eager woman of the people. This absurd journalistic pose of omniscience, of infallibility – this non-existent garment of supreme wisdom that, like the King's clothes in the fairy story, was donned to hide his nakedness by every strutting nonentity of Fleet Street! She would have no use for it. It should be a friend, a comrade, a fellow-servant of the great Master, taking counsel with them, asking their help. Government by the people for the people! It must be made real. These silent, thoughtful-looking workers, hurrying homewards through the darkening streets; these patient, shrewd-planning housewives casting their shadows on the drawn-down blinds: it was they who should be shaping the world, not

the journalists to whom all life was but so much "copy." This monstrous conspiracy, once of the Sword, of the Church, now of the Press, that put all Government into the hands of a few stuffy old gentlemen, politicians, leader writers, without sympathy or understanding: it was time that it was swept away. She would raise a new standard. It should be, not "Listen to me, oh ye dumb," but, "Speak to me. Tell me your hidden hopes, your fears, your dreams. Tell me your experience, your thoughts born of knowledge, of suffering."

She would get into correspondence with them, go among them, talk to them. The difficulty, at first, would be in getting them to write to her, to open their minds to her. These voiceless masses that never spoke, but were always being spoken for by self-appointed "leaders," "representatives," who immediately they had climbed into prominence took their place among the rulers, and then from press and platform shouted to them what they were to think and feel. It was as if the Drill-Sergeant were to claim to be the "leader," the "representative" of his squad; or the sheep-dog to pose as the "delegate" of the sheep. Dealt with always as if they were mere herds, mere flocks, they had almost lost the power of individual utterance. One would have to teach them, encourage them.

She remembered a Sunday class she had once conducted; and how for a long time she had tried in vain to get the children to "come in," to take a hand. That she might get in touch with them, understand their small problems, she had urged them to

ask questions. And there had fallen such long silences. Until, at last, one cheeky ragamuffin had piped out:

"Please, Miss, have you got red hair all over you? Or only on your head?"

For answer she had rolled up her sleeve, and let them examine her arm. And then, in her turn, had insisted on rolling up his sleeve, revealing the fact that his arms above the wrists had evidently not too recently been washed; and the episode had ended in laughter and a babel of shrill voices. And, at once, they were a party of chums, discussing matters together.

They were but children, these tired men and women, just released from their day's toil, hastening homeward to their play, or to their evening tasks. A little humour, a little understanding, a recognition of the wonderful likeness of us all to one another underneath our outward coverings was all that was needed to break down the barrier, establish comradeship. She stood aside a moment to watch them streaming by. Keen, strong faces were among them, high, thoughtful brows, kind eyes; they must learn to think, to speak for themselves.

She would build again the Forum. The people's business should no longer be settled for them behind lackey-guarded doors. The good of the farm labourer should be determined not exclusively by the squire and his relations. The man with the hoe, the man with the bent back and the patient ox-like eyes: he, too, should be invited to the Council board. Middle-class domestic problems should be solved not solely by fine gentlemen

from Oxford; the wife of the little clerk should be allowed her say. War or peace, it should no longer be regarded as a question concerning only the aged rich. The common people – the cannon fodder, the men who would die, and the women who would weep: they should be given something more than the privilege of either cheering platform patriots or being summoned for interrupting public meetings.

From a dismal side street there darted past her a small, shapeless figure in crumpled cap and apron: evidently a member of that lazy, over-indulged class, the domestic servant. Judging from the talk of the drawing-rooms, the correspondence in the papers, a singularly unsatisfactory body. They toiled not, lived in luxury and demanded grand pianos. Someone had proposed doing something for them. They themselves – it seemed that even they had a sort of conscience – were up in arms against it. Too much kindness even they themselves perceived was bad for them. They were holding a meeting that night to explain how contented they were. Six peeresses had consented to attend, and speak for them.

Likely enough that there were good-for-nothing, cockered menials imposing upon incompetent mistresses. There were pampered slaves in Rome. But these others. These poor little helpless sluts. There were thousands such in every city, over-worked and under-fed, living lonely, pleasureless lives. They must be taught to speak in other voices than the dulcet tones of peeresses. By the light of the guttering candles, from their chill

attics, they should write to her their ill-spelt visions.

She had reached a quiet, tree-bordered road, surrounding a great park. Lovers, furtively holding hands, passed her by, whispering.

She would write books. She would choose for her heroine a woman of the people. How full of drama, of tragedy must be their stories: their problems the grim realities of life, not only its mere sentimental embroideries. The daily struggle for bare existence, the ever-shadowing menace of unemployment, of illness, leaving them helpless amid the grinding forces crushing them down on every side. The ceaseless need for courage, for cunning. For in the kingdom of the poor the tyrant and the oppressor still sit in the high places, the robber still rides fearless.

In a noisy, flaring street, a thin-clad woman passed her, carrying a netted bag showing two loaves. In a flash, it came to her what it must mean to the poor; this daily bread that in comfortable homes had come to be regarded as a thing like water; not to be considered, to be used without stint, wasted, thrown about. Borne by those feeble, knotted hands, Joan saw it revealed as something holy: hallowed by labour; sanctified by suffering, by sacrifice; worshipped with fear and prayer.

In quiet streets of stately houses, she caught glimpses through uncurtained windows of richly-laid dinner-tables about which servants moved noiselessly, arranging flowers and silver. She wondered idly if she would every marry. A gracious hostess, gathering around her brilliant men and women, statesmen,

writers, artists, captains of industry: counselling them, even learning from them: encouraging shy genius. Perhaps, in a perfectly harmless way, allowing it the inspiration derivable from a well-regulated devotion to herself. A salon that should be the nucleus of all those forces that influence influences, over which she would rule with sweet and wise authority. The idea appealed to her.

Into the picture, slightly to the background, she unconsciously placed Greyson. His tall, thin figure with its air of distinction seemed to fit in; Greyson would be very restful. She could see his handsome, ascetic face flush with pleasure as, after the guests were gone, she would lean over the back of his chair and caress for a moment his dark, soft hair tinged here and there with grey. He would always adore her, in that distant, undemonstrative way of his that would never be tiresome or exacting. They would have children. But not too many. That would make the house noisy and distract her from her work. They would be beautiful and clever; unless all the laws of heredity were to be set aside for her especial injury. She would train them, shape them to be the heirs of her labour, bearing her message to the generations that should follow.

At a corner where the trams and buses stopped she lingered for a while, watching the fierce struggle; the weak and aged being pushed back time after time, hardly seeming to even resent it, regarding it as in the natural order of things. It was so absurd, apart from the injustice, the brutality of it! The poor, fighting among themselves! She felt as once when watching a crowd of

birds to whom she had thrown a handful of crumbs in winter time. As if they had not enemies enough: cats, weasels, rats, hawks, owls, the hunger and the cold. And added to all, they must needs make the struggle yet harder for one another: pecking at each other's eyes, joining with one another to attack the fallen. These tired men, these weary women, pale-faced lads and girls, why did they not organize among themselves some system that would do away with this daily warfare of each against all. If only they could be got to grasp the fact that they were one family, bound together by suffering. Then, and not till then, would they be able to make their power felt? That would have to come first: the *Esprit de Corps* of the Poor.

In the end she would go into Parliament. It would be bound to come soon, the woman's vote. And after that the opening of all doors would follow. She would wear her college robes. It would be far more fitting than a succession of flimsy frocks that would have no meaning in them. What pity it was that the art of dressing – its relation to life – was not better understood. What beauty-hating devil had prompted the workers to discard their characteristic costumes that had been both beautiful and serviceable for these hateful slop-shop clothes that made them look like walking scarecrows. Why had the coming of Democracy coincided seemingly with the spread of ugliness: dull towns, mean streets, paper-strewn parks, corrugated iron roofs, Christian chapels that would be an insult to a heathen idol; hideous factories (Why need they be hideous!); chimney-pot

hats, baggy trousers, vulgar advertisements, stupid fashions for women that spoilt every line of their figure: dinginess, drabness, monotony everywhere. It was ugliness that was strangling the soul of the people; stealing from them all dignity, all self-respect, all honour for one another; robbing them of hope, of reverence, of joy in life.

Beauty. That was the key to the riddle. All Nature: its golden sunsets and its silvery dawns; the glory of piled-up clouds, the mystery of moonlit glades; its rivers winding through the meadows; the calling of its restless seas; the tender witchery of Spring; the blazonry of autumn woods; its purple moors and the wonder of its silent mountains; its cobwebs glittering with a thousand jewels; the pageantry of starry nights. Form, colour, music! The feathered choristers of bush and brake raising their matin and their evensong, the whispering of the leaves, the singing of the waters, the voices of the winds. Beauty and grace in every living thing, but man. The leaping of the hares, the grouping of cattle, the flight of swallows, the dainty loveliness of insects' wings, the glossy skin of horses rising and falling to the play of mighty muscles. Was it not seeking to make plain to us that God's language was beauty. Man must learn beauty that he may understand God.

She saw the London of the future. Not the vision popular just then: a soaring whirl of machinery in motion, of moving pavements and flying omnibuses; of screaming gramophones and standardized "homes": a city where Electricity was King and

man its soulless slave. But a city of peace, of restful spaces, of leisured men and women; a city of fine streets and pleasant houses, where each could live his own life, learning freedom, individuality; a city of noble schools; of workshops that should be worthy of labour, filled with light and air; smoke and filth driven from the land: science, no longer bound to commercialism, having discovered cleaner forces; a city of gay playgrounds where children should learn laughter; of leafy walks where the creatures of the wood and field should be as welcome guests helping to teach sympathy and kindliness: a city of music, of colour, of gladness. Beauty worshipped as religion; ugliness banished as a sin: no ugly slums, no ugly cruelty, no slatternly women and brutalized men, no ugly, sobbing children; no ugly vice flaunting in every highway its insult to humanity: a city clad in beauty as with a living garment where God should walk with man.

She had reached a neighbourhood of narrow, crowded streets. The women were mostly without hats; and swarthy men, rolling cigarettes, lounged against doorways. The place had a quaint foreign flavour. Tiny cafés, filled with smoke and noise, and clean, inviting restaurants abounded. She was feeling hungry, and, choosing one the door of which stood open, revealing white tablecloths and a pleasant air of cheerfulness, she entered. It was late and the tables were crowded. Only at one, in a far corner, could she detect a vacant place, opposite to a slight, pretty-looking girl very quietly dressed. She made her way across and the girl, anticipating her request, welcomed her with a smile.

They ate for a while in silence, divided only by the narrow table, their heads, when they leant forward, almost touching. Joan noticed the short, white hands, the fragrance of some delicate scent. There was something odd about her. She seemed to be unnecessarily conscious of being alone. Suddenly she spoke.

"Nice little restaurant, this," she said. "One of the few places where you can depend upon not being annoyed."

Joan did not understand. "In what way?" she asked.

"Oh, you know, men," answered the girl. "They come and sit down opposite to you, and won't leave you alone. At most of the places, you've got to put up with it or go outside. Here, old Gustav never permits it."

Joan was troubled. She was rather looking forward to occasional restaurant dinners, where she would be able to study London's Bohemia.

"You mean," she asked, "that they force themselves upon you, even if you make it plain – "

"Oh, the plainer you make it that you don't want them, the more sport they think it," interrupted the girl with a laugh.

Joan hoped she was exaggerating. "I must try and select a table where there is some good-natured girl to keep me in countenance," she said with a smile.

"Yes, I was glad to see you," answered the girl. "It's hateful, dining by oneself. Are you living alone?"

"Yes," answered Joan. "I'm a journalist."

"I thought you were something," answered the girl. "I'm an

artist. Or, rather, was," she added after a pause.

"Why did you give it up?" asked Joan.

"Oh, I haven't given it up, not entirely," the girl answered. "I can always get a couple of sovereigns for a sketch, if I want it, from one or another of the frame-makers. And they can generally sell them for a fiver. I've seen them marked up. Have you been long in London?"

"No," answered Joan. "I'm a Lancashire lass."

"Curious," said the girl, "so am I. My father's a mill manager near Bolton. You weren't educated there?"

"No," Joan admitted. "I went to Rodean at Brighton when I was ten years old, and so escaped it. Nor were you," she added with a smile, "judging from your accent."

"No," answered the other, "I was at Hastings – Miss Gwyn's. Funny how we seem to have always been near to one another. Dad wanted me to be a doctor. But I'd always been mad about art."

Joan had taken a liking to the girl. It was a spiritual, vivacious face with frank eyes and a firm mouth; and the voice was low and strong.

"Tell me," she said, "what interfered with it?" Unconsciously she was leaning forward, her chin supported by her hands. Their faces were very near to one another.

The girl looked up. She did not answer for a moment. There came a hardening of the mouth before she spoke.

"A baby," she said. "Oh, it was my own fault," she continued.

"I wanted it. It was all the talk at the time. You don't remember. Our right to children. No woman complete without one. Maternity, woman's kingdom. All that sort of thing. As if the storks brought them. Don't suppose it made any real difference; but it just helped me to pretend that it was something pretty and high-class. 'Overmastering passion' used to be the explanation, before that. I guess it's all much of a muchness: just natural instinct."

The restaurant had been steadily emptying. Monsieur Gustav and his ample-bosomed wife were seated at a distant table, eating their own dinner.

"Why couldn't you have married?" asked Joan.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Who was there for me to marry?" she answered. "The men who wanted me: clerks, young tradesmen, down at home – I wasn't taking any of that lot. And the men I might have fancied were all of them too poor. There was one student. He's got on since. Easy enough for him to talk about waiting. Meanwhile. Well, it's like somebody suggesting dinner to you the day after to-morrow. All right enough, if you're not troubled with an appetite."

The waiter came to clear the table. They were almost the last customers left. The man's tone and manner jarred upon Joan. She had not noticed it before. Joan ordered coffee and the girl, exchanging a joke with the waiter, added a liqueur.

"But why should you give up your art?" persisted Joan. It was that was sticking in her mind. "I should have thought that, if only

for the sake of the child, you would have gone on with it."

"Oh, I told myself all that," answered the girl. "Was going to devote my life to it. Did for nearly two years. Till I got sick of living like a nun: never getting a bit of excitement. You see, I've got the poison in me. Or, maybe, it had always been there."

"What's become of it?" asked Joan. "The child?"

"Mother's got it," answered the girl. "Seemed best for the poor little beggar. I'm supposed to be dead, and my husband gone abroad." She gave a short, dry laugh. "Mother brings him up to see me once a year. They've got quite fond of him."

"What are you doing now?" asked Joan, in a low tone.

"Oh, you needn't look so scared," laughed the girl, "I haven't come down to that." Her voice had changed. It had a note of shrillness. In some indescribable way she had grown coarse. "I'm a kept woman," she explained. "What else is any woman?"

She reached for her jacket; and the waiter sprang forward and helped her on with it, prolonging the business needlessly. She wished him "Good evening" in a tone of distant hauteur, and led the way to the door. Outside the street was dim and silent. Joan held out her hand.

"No hope of happy endings," she said with a forced laugh. "Couldn't marry him I suppose?"

"He has asked me," answered the girl with a swagger. "Not sure that it would suit me now. They're not so nice to you when they've got you fixed up. So long."

She turned abruptly and walked rapidly away. Joan moved

instinctively in the opposite direction, and after a few minutes found herself in a broad well-lighted thoroughfare. A newsboy was shouting his wares.

"'Orrible murder of a woman. Shockin' details. Speshul," repeating it over and over again in a hoarse, expressionless monotone.

He was selling the papers like hot cakes; the purchasers too eager to even wait for their change. She wondered, with a little lump in her throat, how many would have stopped to buy had he been calling instead: "Discovery of new sonnet by Shakespeare. Extra special."

Through swinging doors, she caught glimpses of foul interiors, crowded with men and women released from their toil, taking their evening pleasure. From coloured posters outside the great theatres and music halls, vulgarity and lewdness leered at her, side by side with announcements that the house was full. From every roaring corner, scintillating lights flared forth the merits of this public benefactor's whisky, of this other celebrity's beer: it seemed the only message the people cared to hear. Even among the sirens of the pavement, she noticed that the quiet and merely pretty were hardly heeded. It was everywhere the painted and the overdressed that drew the roving eyes.

She remembered a pet dog that someone had given her when she was a girl, and how one afternoon she had walked with the tears streaming down her face because, in spite of her scoldings and her pleadings, it would keep stopping to lick up filth from

the roadway. A kindly passer-by had laughed and told her not to mind.

"Why, that's a sign of breeding, that is, Missie," the man had explained. "It's the classy ones that are always the worst."

It had come to her afterwards craving with its soft brown, troubled eyes for forgiveness. But she had never been able to break it of the habit.

Must man for ever be chained by his appetites to the unclean: ever be driven back, dragged down again into the dirt by his own instincts: ever be rendered useless for all finer purposes by the baseness of his own desires?

The City of her Dreams! The mingled voices of the crowd shaped itself into a mocking laugh.

It seemed to her that it was she that they were laughing at, pointing her out to one another, jeering at her, reviling her, threatening her.

She hurried onward with bent head, trying to escape them. She felt so small, so helpless. Almost she cried out in her despair.

She must have walked mechanically. Looking up she found herself in her own street. And as she reached her doorway the tears came suddenly.

She heard a quick step behind her, and turning, she saw a man with a latch key in his hand. He passed her and opened the door; and then, facing round, stood aside for her to enter. He was a sturdy, thick-set man with a strong, massive face. It would have been ugly but for the deep, flashing eyes. There was tenderness

and humour in them.

"We are next floor neighbours," he said. "My name's Phillips."

Joan thanked him. As he held the door open for her their hands accidentally touched. Joan wished him good-night and went up the stairs. There was no light in her room: only the faint reflection of the street lamp outside.

She could still see him: the boyish smile. And his voice that had sent her tears back again as if at the word of command.

She hoped he had not seen them. What a little fool she was.

A little laugh escaped her.

CHAPTER VI

One day Joan, lunching at the club, met Madge Singleton.

"I've had such a funny letter from Flossie," said Joan, "begging me almost with tears in her ink to come to her on Sunday evening to meet a 'gentleman friend' of hers, as she calls him, and give her my opinion of him. What on earth is she up to?"

"It's all right," answered Madge. "She doesn't really want our opinion of him – or rather she doesn't want our real opinion of him. She only wants us to confirm hers. She's engaged to him."

"Flossie engaged!" Joan seemed surprised.

"Yes," answered Madge. "It used to be a custom. Young men used to ask young women to marry them. And if they consented it was called 'being engaged.' Still prevails, so I am told, in certain classes."

"Thanks," said Joan. "I have heard of it."

"I thought perhaps you hadn't from your tone," explained Madge.

"But if she's already engaged to him, why risk criticism of him," argued Joan, ignoring Madge's flippancy. "It's too late."

"Oh, she's going to break it off unless we all assure her that we find him brainy," Madge explained with a laugh. "It seems her father wasn't brainy and her mother was. Or else it was the other way about: I'm not quite sure. But whichever it was, it led to ructions. Myself, if he's at all possible and seems to care for

her, I intend to find him brilliant."

"And suppose she repeats her mother's experience," suggested Joan.

"There were the Norton-Browns," answered Madge. "Impossible to have found a more evenly matched pair. They both write novels – very good novels, too; and got jealous of one another; and threw press-notices at one another's head all breakfast-time; until they separated. Don't know of any recipe myself for being happy ever after marriage, except not expecting it."

"Or keeping out of it altogether," added Joan.

"Ever spent a day at the Home for Destitute Gentlewomen at East Sheen?" demanded Madge.

"Not yet," admitted Joan. "May have to, later on."

"It ought to be included in every woman's education," Madge continued. "It is reserved for spinsters of over forty-five. Susan Fleming wrote an article upon it for the *Teacher's Friend*; and spent an afternoon and evening there. A month later she married a grocer with five children. The only sound suggestion for avoiding trouble that I ever came across was in a burlesque of the *Blue Bird*. You remember the scene where the spirits of the children are waiting to go down to earth and be made into babies? Someone had stuck up a notice at the entrance to the gangway: 'Don't get born. It only means worry.'"

Flossie had her dwelling-place in a second floor bed-sitting-room of a lodging house in Queen's Square, Bloomsbury; but the

drawing-room floor being for the moment vacant, Flossie had persuaded her landlady to let her give her party there; it seemed as if fate approved of the idea. The room was fairly full when Joan arrived. Flossie took her out on the landing, and closed the door behind them.

"You will be honest with me, won't you?" pleaded Flossie, "because it's so important, and I don't seem able to think for myself. As they say, no man can be his own solicitor, can he? Of course I like him, and all that – very much. And I really believe he loves me. We were children together when Mummy was alive; and then he had to go abroad; and has only just come back. Of course, I've got to think of him, too, as he says. But then, on the other hand, I don't want to make a mistake. That would be so terrible, for both of us; and of course I am clever; and there was poor Mummy and Daddy. I'll tell you all about them one day. It was so awfully sad. Get him into a corner and talk to him. You'll be able to judge in a moment, you're so wonderful. He's quiet on the outside, but I think there's depth in him. We must go in now."

She had talked so rapidly Joan felt as if her hat were being blown away. She had difficulty in recognizing Flossie. All the cocksure pertness had departed. She seemed just a kid.

Joan promised faithfully; and Flossie, standing on tiptoe, suddenly kissed her and then bustled her in.

Flossie's young man was standing near the fire talking, or rather listening, to a bird-like little woman in a short white frock and blue ribbons. A sombre lady just behind her, whom Joan

from the distance took to be her nurse, turned out to be her secretary, whose duty it was to be always at hand, prepared to take down any happy idea that might occur to the bird-like little woman in the course of conversation. The bird-like little woman was Miss Rose Tolley, a popular novelist. She was explaining to Flossie's young man, whose name was Sam Halliday, the reason for her having written "Running Waters," her latest novel.

"It is daring," she admitted. "I must be prepared for opposition. But it had to be stated."

"I take myself as typical," she continued. "When I was twenty I could have loved you. You were the type of man I did love."

Mr. Halliday, who had been supporting the weight of his body upon his right leg, transferred the burden to his left.

"But now I'm thirty-five; and I couldn't love you if I tried." She shook her curls at him. "It isn't your fault. It is that I have changed. Suppose I'd married you?"

"Bit of bad luck for both of us," suggested Mr. Halliday.

"A tragedy," Miss Tolley corrected him. "There are millions of such tragedies being enacted around us at this moment. Sensitive women compelled to suffer the embraces of men that they have come to loathe. What's to be done?"

Flossie, who had been hovering impatient, broke in.

"Oh, don't you believe her," she advised Mr. Halliday. "She loves you still. She's only teasing you. This is Joan."

She introduced her. Miss Tolley bowed; and allowed herself to be drawn away by a lank-haired young man who had likewise

been waiting for an opening. He represented the Uplift Film Association of Chicago, and was wishful to know if Miss Tolley would consent to altering the last chapter and so providing "Running Waters" with a happy ending. He pointed out the hopelessness of it in its present form, for film purposes.

The discussion was brief. "Then I'll send your agent the contract to-morrow," Joan overheard him say a minute later.

Mr. Sam Halliday she liked at once. He was a clean-shaven, square-jawed young man, with quiet eyes and a pleasant voice.

"Try and find me brainy," he whispered to her, as soon as Flossie was out of earshot. "Talk to me about China. I'm quite intelligent on China."

They both laughed, and then shot a guilty glance in Flossie's direction.

"Do the women really crush their feet?" asked Joan.

"Yes," he answered. "All those who have no use for them. About one per cent. of the population. To listen to Miss Tolley you would think that half the women wanted a new husband every ten years. It's always the one per cent. that get themselves talked about. The other ninety-nine are too busy."

"You are young for a philosopher," said Joan.

He laughed. "I told you I'd be all right if you started me on China," he said.

"Why are you marrying. Flossie?" Joan asked him. She thought his point of view would be interesting.

"Not sure I am yet," he answered with a grin. "It depends upon

how I get through this evening." He glanced round the room. "Have I got to pass all this crowd, I wonder?" he added.

Joan's eyes followed. It was certainly an odd collection. Flossie, in her hunt for brains, had issued her invitations broadcast; and her fate had been that of the Charity concert. Not all the stars upon whom she had most depended had turned up. On the other hand not a single freak had failed her. At the moment, the centre of the room was occupied by a gentleman and two ladies in classical drapery. They were holding hands in an attitude suggestive of a bas-relief. Joan remembered them, having seen them on one or two occasions wandering in the King's Road, Chelsea; still maintaining, as far as the traffic would allow, the bas-relief suggestion; and generally surrounded by a crowd of children, ever hopeful that at the next corner they would stop and do something really interesting. They belonged to a society whose object was to lure the London public by the force of example towards the adoption of the early Greek fashions and the simpler Greek attitudes. A friend of Flossie's had thrown in her lot with them, but could never be induced to abandon her umbrella. They also, as Joan told herself, were reformers. Near to them was a picturesque gentleman with a beard down to his waist whose "stunt" – as Flossie would have termed it – was hygienic clothing; it seemed to contain an undue proportion of fresh air. There were ladies in coats and stand-up collars, and gentlemen with ringlets. More than one of the guests would have been better, though perhaps not happier, for a bath.

"I fancy that's the idea," said Joan. "What will you do if you fail? Go back to China?"

"Yes," he answered. "And take her with me. Poor little girl."

Joan rather resented his tone.

"We are not all alike," she remarked. "Some of us are quite sane."

He looked straight into her eyes. "You are," he said. "I have been reading your articles. They are splendid. I'm going to help."

"How can you?" she said. "I mean, how will you?"

"Shipping is my business," he said. "I'm going to help sailor men. See that they have somewhere decent to go to, and don't get robbed. And then there are the Lascars, poor devils. Nobody ever takes their part."

"How did you come across them?" she asked. "The articles, I mean. Did Flo give them to you?"

"No," he answered. "Just chance. Caught sight of your photo."

"Tell me," she said. "If it had been the photo of a woman with a bony throat and a beaky nose would you have read them?"

He thought a moment. "Guess not," he answered. "You're just as bad," he continued. "Isn't it the pale-faced young clergyman with the wavy hair and the beautiful voice that you all flock to hear? No getting away from nature. But it wasn't only that." He hesitated.

"I want to know," she said.

"You looked so young," he answered. "I had always had the idea that it was up to the old people to put the world to rights

– that all I had to do was to look after myself. It came to me suddenly while you were talking to me – I mean while I was reading you: that if you were worrying yourself about it, I'd got to come in, too – that it would be mean of me not to. It wasn't like being preached to. It was somebody calling for help."

Instinctively she held out her hand and he grasped it.

Flossie came up at the same instant. She wanted to introduce him to Miss Lavery, who had just arrived.

"Hullo!" she said. "Are you two concluding a bargain?"

"Yes," said Joan. "We are founding the League of Youth. You've got to be in it. We are going to establish branches all round the world."

Flossie's young man was whisked away. Joan, who had seated herself in a small chair, was alone for a few minutes.

Miss Tolley had chanced upon a Human Document, with the help of which she was hopeful of starting a "Press Controversy" concerning the morality, or otherwise, of "Running Waters." The secretary stood just behind her, taking notes. They had drifted quite close. Joan could not help overhearing.

"It always seemed to me immoral, the marriage ceremony," the Human Document was explaining. She was a thin, sallow woman, with an untidy head and restless eyes that seemed to be always seeking something to look at and never finding it. "How can we pledge the future? To bind oneself to live with a man when perhaps we have ceased to care for him; it's hideous."

Miss Tolley murmured agreement.

"Our love was beautiful," continued the Human Document, eager, apparently, to relate her experience for the common good; "just because it was a free gift. We were not fettered to one another. At any moment either of us could have walked out of the house. The idea never occurred to us; not for years – five, to be exact."

The secretary, at a sign from Miss Tolley, made a memorandum of it.

"And then did your feelings towards him change suddenly?" questioned Miss Tolley.

"No," explained the Human Document, in the same quick, even tones; "so far as I was concerned, I was not conscious of any alteration in my own attitude. But he felt the need of more solitude – for his development. We parted quite good friends."

"Oh," said Miss Tolley. "And were there any children?"

"Only two," answered the Human Document, "both girls."

"What has become of them?" persisted Miss Tolley.

The Human Document looked offended. "You do not think I would have permitted any power on earth to separate them from me, do you?" she answered. "I said to him, 'They are mine, mine. Where I go, they go. Where I stay, they stay.' He saw the justice of my argument."

"And they are with you now?" concluded Miss Tolley.

"You must come and see them," the Human Document insisted. "Such dear, magnetic creatures. I superintend their entire education myself. We have a cottage in Surrey. It's rather

a tight fit. You see, there are seven of us now. But the three girls can easily turn in together for a night, Abner will be delighted."

"Abner is your second?" suggested Miss Tolley.

"My third," the Human Document corrected her. "After Eustace, I married Ivanoff. I say 'married' because I regard it as the holiest form of marriage. He had to return to his own country. There was a political movement on foot. He felt it his duty to go. I want you particularly to meet the boy. He will interest you."

Miss Tolley appeared to be getting muddled. "Whose boy?" she demanded.

"Ivanoff's," explained the Human Document. "He was our only child."

Flossie appeared, towing a white-haired, distinguished-looking man, a Mr. Folk. She introduced him and immediately disappeared. Joan wished she had been left alone a little longer. She would like to have heard more. Especially was she curious concerning Abner, the lady's third. Would the higher moral law compel him, likewise, to leave the poor lady saddled with another couple of children? Or would she, on this occasion, get in – or rather, get off, first? Her own fancy was to back Abner. She did catch just one sentence before Miss Tolley, having obtained more food for reflection than perhaps she wanted, signalled to her secretary that the note-book might be closed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.