

The Lady of the Basement Flat

Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

Chapter One.

Why Not?

At three o'clock this afternoon Evelyn Wastneys died. I am Evelyn Wastneys, and I died, standing at the door of an old country home in Ireland, with my hands full of ridiculous little silver shoes and horseshoes, and a Paris hat on my head, and a trembling treble voice whispering in my ear:—

“Good-bye, Evelyn darling—darling! Thank you—thank you for all you have been to me! Oh, Evelyn, *promise* you will not be unhappy!”

Then some mysterious hidden muscle, whose existence I had never before suspected, pulled two little strings at the corners of my mouth, and my lips smiled—a marionette smile—and a marionette voice cried jauntily:—

“Unhappy? Never! Why, I am free! I am going to begin to live.”

Then I watched a tall bridegroom in tweeds tenderly help a little bride in mole-coloured taffeta and sable furs into the waiting car, the horn blew, the engines whirled, a big hand and a little one flourished handkerchiefs out of the window, a white satin shoe danced ridiculously after the wheels, and Aunt Emmeline cried sensibly:—

“That’s over, thank goodness! The wind *is* sharp! Let’s have tea!”

She hurried into the house to give orders, and the old Evelyn Wastneys stood staring after the car, as it sped down the drive, passed through the lodge gates, and spun out into the high road. She had the strangest, most curious feeling that it was only the ghost of herself who stood there—a ghost in a Paris hat and gown, with long suede gloves wrinkled up her arms, and a pendant of mingled initials sparkling on her lace waistcoat. The real, true Evelyn—a little, naked, shivering creature—was skurrying after that car, bleating piteously to be taken in.

But the car rolled on quicker and quicker, its occupants too much taken up with themselves to have time to waste on dull other people. In another minute it was out of sight, but the ghost did not come back. The new Evelyn lingered upon the steps, waiting for it to return. There was such a blank, empty ache in the place where her heart used to be. It seemed impossible that that skurrying little ghost would not come back, nestle

again in its own place, and warm up the empty void. But it never came back. The new Evelyn turned and walked into the house.

“Well, it has all gone off very well! Kathleen looked quite nice, though I always do say that a real lace veil is less becoming than tulle. There was a rose and thistle pattern right across her nose, and personally I think those sheaves of lilies are too large. I hope she’ll be happy, I am sure! Mr Anderson seems a nice man; but one never knows. It’s always a risk going abroad. A young Canadian proposed to me as a girl. I said to him, ‘Do you think you could be nice enough to make up to me for home, and country, and relations and friends, and associations and customs, and everything I have valued all my life?’ He said it was a matter of opinion. What did I think? I said it was ridiculous nonsense. No man was nice enough! So he married Rosa Bates, and I hear their second boy is a hunchback. You are eating nothing, my dear. Take a scone. Let’s hope it’s all for the best!”

“Best or worst, it’s done now,” I said gloomily. Basil Anderson was certainly “nice,” and, unlike Aunt Emmeline, my sister Kathleen entertained no doubt that he could fill every gap—home, country, friends, a selection of elderly aunts, and even that only sister who had so far acted as buffer between herself and the storms of life. At this very moment the mole-coloured toque was probably reclining comfortably on the tweed shoulder, and a smile was replacing tears as a big booming voice cried comfortably:—

“Evelyn! Oh, *she’ll* be all right! Don’t worry about Evelyn, honey. Think of *me!*”

Following the line of the least resistance, I took the scone and chewed it vacantly. Figuratively speaking, it tasted of dust and ashes; literally, it tasted of nothing at all, and the tea was just a hot fluid which had to be swallowed at intervals, as medicine is swallowed of necessity.

Aunt Emmeline helped herself systematically from each of the plates in turn, working steadily through courses of bread and butter, sandwiches, scone, *petits fours*, and wedding cake. She was a scraggy woman, with the appetite of a giant. Kathie and I used to wonder where the food went! Probably to her tongue!

“Of course,” said Aunt Emmeline, continuing her thoughts aloud, as was her disconcerting habit, “Kathleen has money, and that gives a wife a whip hand. I begged her only yesterday to stand up for herself. Those little fair women are so apt to be bullied. I knew a case. Well, mind, we’ll hope it

mayn't come to *that!* If she is sensible and doesn't expect too much, things may work out all right. Especially for the first years. If anything *does* go wrong, it will be your fault, Evelyn, for spoiling her as you have done."

"Thanks very much for the cheering thought," I said snappily. Aunt Emmeline helped herself to a sandwich, and blinked with exasperating forbearance.

"Not cheerful, perhaps, but it may be *useful!* If you'd taken my advice. It's never too late to mend, Evelyn."

"Even at twenty-six?"

Aunt Emmeline surveyed me critically. She was taking stock, and considering just how young, how old, how fresh, how damaged those lengthy years had left my physical charms. I looked in a long glass opposite, and took stock at the same time. A smart young woman—oh, very smart indeed, for as Kathie had argued, if you can't "blow" expense for your only sister's wedding, when on earth are you going to do it? Light brown hair, "still untouched by grey," hazel eyes with very long, very finely marked eyebrows (secretly they are the joy of my life!) good features, and a sulky expression. The old Evelyn used to be very good-looking—(she's dead now, so I can say so, as much as I like)—this new one is good-looking too, in a disagreeable, unattractive kind of way. If you saw her dining at the next table in an hotel you would say, "Rather a fine-looking girl!" And the man with you would reply, "Think so! Too much of a temper for my fancy. Glad she don't belong to me." I realised as much as I looked in the glass, and that made me crosser than ever. If I had been alone, able to cry, or storm, or grizzle, or go to bed just as I liked, I could have borne it better; but fancy losing your home, and your occupation, and the only person in all the world you really loved, all in one day, and coming straight from the wreck to have tea with Aunt Emmeline!

The sandwich was finished before the inspection. A piece of scone followed.

"Of course," said Aunt Emmeline, "you are *not* in your first bloom. *That* we can't expect. Your colour is a little harder and more fixed" (the figure in the glass gave a spasmodic jerk. The sulky expression was pierced by a gleam of fear. "*Fixed!*" Good gracious! She might be talking of those old people who have little red lines over their cheek-bones in the place of "bloom". It's *ridiculous* to say I am "fixed". It is a matter of indifference to me how I look, but I do insist on truth!) "and your air of pride and

independence is unbecoming in an unmarried girl. Men like to see a girl sweet, clinging, pliant.”

“What men?”

“*All* men!”

“Oh! And in my case, for instance, to whom would you suggest I should proceed to cling?”

“That,” said Aunt Emmeline briskly, “is precisely what I wish to discuss.” She lifted the last morsel of scone from the plate, stared at it, and popped it into her mouth. “My dear, has it ever occurred to you to think what you are going to *do*?”

“Aunt Emmeline, for the last months it has rarely occurred to me to think of anything else!”

“Very well then, that’s all to the good. As I said to Aunt Eliza, let us leave her alone till Kathleen has gone. Evelyn is obstinate, and if you interfere she will only grow more pig-headed. Let her find things out for herself. Experience, Eliza, will do more than either you or I. Sooner or later, even Evelyn must realise that you can’t run a house, and garden, and stable, in the same way on half the ordinary income. Now that Kathleen is married, she naturally takes with her her own fortune.”

She looked at me expectantly, and I smiled, another stiff, marionette smile—and said:—

“How true! Curiously enough, that fact has already penetrated to my dull brain!”

“Now I do hope and pray, Evelyn, that you are not going to argue with me,” cried Aunt Emmeline, with a sudden access of energy which was positively startling. “It’s ridiculous saying that because there is only one mistress instead of two, expense will therefore be halved. I have kept house for thirty-three years, and have never once allowed an order at the door, so I may be supposed to know. Nonsense! The rent is the same, I suppose, and the rates, and the taxes. You must sit down to a decent meal even if you are alone, and it takes the same fire to cook four potatoes as eight. Your garden must be kept going, and if you do away with one horse, you still require a groom, I suppose, to look after the rest. Don’t talk to me of economising; you’d be up to your neck in debt before a year was over—if you weren’t in a lunatic asylum with nervous depression, living alone in that hole-in-a-corner old house, with not a soul but servants

to speak to from morning till night. You have a nervous temperament, Evelyn. You may not realise it, but I remember as a child how you used to fidget and dash about. Dear Kathie sat still and sucked her thumb. I said at the time, 'Evelyn is better-looking, but mark my words, Kathie will be married first!' And you see! It's because I love you, my dear, and you are my dear sister's child that I warn you to beware of living alone in that house!"

"Thank you so much," I said nastily. (When people presage a remark by saying that they only say it because they love you, you may lay long odds that it's going to be disagreeable!) "It certainly sounds a gruesome prospect. Not even a choice between bankruptcy and mania, but a certainty of *both*! And within a year, too! Such a short run for one's money! Aunt Eliza had some suggestion to make, then? And you evidently approved. Would you mind telling me exactly what it was?"

"That is what I am trying to do, but you *will* interrupt. Naturally, your home is with us, your mother's sisters. You shall have the blue room over the porch. If you wish it, we are willing that you should bring your own pictures. The silver and valuables you can send to the bank, and the furniture can be sold. You shall pay us five guineas a week, and we will keep your horse, and house old Bridget if you don't want to part from her. She can attend to your room, and sleep in the third attic. There would be no extras except washing, and a fire in your room. You know how we live; every comfort, but no excess. I disapprove of excess. Eliza and I have often regretted that you and Kathie have such extravagant ways. Early tea, as if you were old women, and bare shoulders for dinner. You may laugh, my dear, but it's no laughing matter. One thing leads to another. You can't wear an evening dress and sit down to a chop. Soup and fish and an *entrée* before you know where you are. We have high tea. You would save money on evening gowns alone. A dressy blouse is all that is required."

Aunt Emmeline paused to draw breath, twitched, jerked, and resolutely braced herself to say a difficult thing.

"And—and we shall welcome you, my dear! We shall be p—pleased to have you!"

Through all her protestation of welcome, through all her effort at warmth, the plain, unflattering truth forced its way out. To entertain a young independent niece beneath their roof might seem to the two aunts a duty, but, most certainly, most obviously, it would *not* be a pleasure! I was quite

convinced that for myself it would be a fiery trial to accept the offer; but it was a shock to realise that the aunts felt the same!

I reviewed the situation from the two points of view, the while Aunt Emmeline feverishly hacked at the hard sugar coating of the cake. For a young, comparatively young woman, to go from the liberty of her own home to share the stuffy, conventional, dull, proper, do-nothing-but-fuss-and-talk-for-ever-about-nothing life of two old ladies in a country town would obviously be a change for the worse; but for the aforesaid old ladies to have their trivial life enriched by the advent of a young, attractive, and (when she is in a good temper!) lively and amusing niece, this should surely be a joy and a gain! But it *wasn't* a joy. The poor old dears were shuddering at the thought that their peaceful routine might be spoiled. They didn't *want* "a bright young influence!" They wanted to be free to do as they liked—sup luxuriously on cocoa and an *egg*, turn up black cashmere skirts over wadded petticoats, and doze before the fire, discuss the servants' failings by the hour, drink glasses of hot water, and go to bed at ten o'clock.—As she hacked at the sugar crust, the corners of Aunt Emmeline's lips turned more and more downward. My silence had been taken for consent, and in the recesses of her heart she was saying to herself, "Farewell! a long farewell to all our frowstings!" I felt sorry for the poor old soul, and hastened to put her out of her misery.

"It's very good of you, Aunt Emmeline. And Aunt Eliza. Thank you *very* much, but I have quite decided to have a home of my own, even though I can't afford to keep on The Clough. I am going to live in London."

Just for one second, uncontrollable relief and joy gleamed from the watching eyes, then the mask fell, and she valiantly tried to look distressed.

"Ah, Evelyn! Obstinate again! Setting yourself up to know better than your elders. There'll be a bitter awakening for you some day, my dear, and when it comes you will be glad enough of your old aunties' help. Well! the door will never be closed against you. However hard and ungrateful you may be, we shall remember our duty to our sister's child. Whenever you choose to return—"

"I shall see the candle burning in the casement window!"

She looked so pained, so shocked, that if I had had any heart left I should have put my arms round her neck, and begged her pardon with a kiss; but I had no heart, only something cold, and hard, and tight, which made it impossible to be loving or kind, so I said hastily:—

“I shall certainly want to pay you a visit some day. It is very kind of you to promise to have me. After living in London, Ferbay will seem quite a haven of rest.”

Aunt Emmeline accepted the olive branch with a sniff.

“But why London?” she inquired.

“Why not?” I replied. It was the only answer it seemed possible to make!

Chapter Two.

Aunt Eliza Speaks.

It is two days after the wedding. Kathie has been Mrs Basil Anderson for forty-eight hours, and no doubt looks back upon her spinster existence as a vague, unsatisfactory dream. She is reclining on a deck-chair on board the great ship which is bearing her to her new home, and her devoted husband is hovering by her side. I can just imagine how she looks, in her white blanket coat, and the blue hood—*just* the right shade to go with her eyes—an artful little curl, which has taken her quite three minutes to arrange, falling over one temple, and her spandy little shoes stretched out at full length. I know those shoes! By special request I rubbed the soles on the gravel paths, so that they might not look *too* newly married. Quite certainly Kathie will be throwing an occasional thought to the girl she left behind her, a “poor old Evelyn!” with a dim, pitiful little ache at the thought of my barren lot. Quite certainly, too, for one moment when she remembers, there will be twenty when she forgets. Quite right, of course! Quite natural, and wife-like, and just as it should be, and only a selfish, ungenerous wretch could wish it to be otherwise. All the same—

I wrenched myself out of the aunts’ clutches yesterday morning on the plea of going home to tidy up. Though the wedding took place from their house, all the preparatory muddle happened here, and it will take days and days to go through Kathie’s rooms alone, and decide what to keep, what to give away, and what to burn outright.

The drawers were littered with pretty rubbish—oddments of ribbon, old gloves, crumpled flowers, and the like. It goes against the principles of any right-minded female to give away tawdry fineries, and yet—and yet—*Could* I bear to destroy them? To see those little white gloves shrivel up in the flames, the high heeled little slippers crumple and split? It would seem like making a bonfire of Kathie herself.

I tidied, and arranged, and packed into fresh parcels, working at fever heat with my hands, while all the time the voice in my brain kept repeating, “Now, Evelyn, what are you going to do? What are you going to do, my dear, with your blank new life?”

To leave the old home and start afresh—that is as far as I have got so far—but I must make up my mind, and quickly too, for this house is too full of memories to be a healthy shelter. Kathie and I have lived here ever

since we left school, first with father, then after his death with an old governess-companion. Since her marriage a year ago we have been alone, luxuriating in our freedom, and soothing the protestations of aunts by constant promises to look out for a successor. Then Kathie met Basil Anderson, and no one was cruel enough to grudge us our last months together.

Now I am alone, with no one in the world to consider beside myself, with my own home to make, my own work to find, my own happiness to discover. Does it make it better or worse, I wonder, that I am rich, and the question of money does not enter in? Ninety-nine people out of a hundred would answer at once that it is better, but I'm not so sure. If I had a tiny income, just enough to ensure me from absolute want, hard regular work would be necessary, and might be good for body and brain. I *want* work! I must have it if I am to keep going, but the mischief is, I have never been taught to be useful, and I have no idea what I could do! I can drive a car. I can ride anything that goes on four legs. I can dance, and skate, and arrange flowers with taste. I can re-trim a hat, and at a pinch make a whole blouse. I can order a nice meal, and grumble when it is spoiled. I can strum on the piano and paint Christmas cards. I can entertain a house-party of big-wigs.

I have also (it seems a queer thing to say!) a kind of genius for simply—being kind! The poor people in the village call me “the kind one,” to distinguish me from Kathie, who, poor lamb! never did an unkind thing in her life. But she didn't always *understand*, that was the difference. When they did wrong she was shocked and estranged, while I felt dreadfully, dreadfully sorry, and more anxious than ever to help them again. Kathie used to think me too mild, but I don't know! The consequences of sin are so terrible in themselves, that I always long to throw in a lot of help with the blame. The people about here seem to know this by instinct, for they come to me in their troubles and anxieties and—*shames*, poor souls! and open their hearts as they do to nobody else. “Sure then, most people are kind in patches,” an old woman said to me one day; “'tis yourself that is kind *all round*!”

I don't know that it's much credit to do what is no effort, and certainly if I could choose a rôle in life it would be to play the part of a good fairy, comforting people, cheering them up, helping them over stiles, springing delightful little surprises upon them, just where the road looked blocked! The trouble is that I've no gift for organised charity. I have a pretty middling strong will of my own (“pigheadedness” Aunt Emmeline calls it!) and committees drive me daft. They may be useful things in their way, but

it's not my way. I want to get to work on my own, and not to sit talk, talk, talking over every miserable, piffling little detail. No! If I play fairy, I must at least be free to wave my own wand, and to find my own niche where I can wave it to the best advantage. The great, all-absorbing question is—*where* and *how* to begin?

Advertisements are the orthodox refuge of the perplexed. Suppose, for the moment, that I advertised, stating my needs and qualifications in the ordinary shilling-a-line fashion. It would run something like this:—

“Lady. Young. Healthy. Good appearance. Seeks occupation for a loving heart. Town or country. Travel if required.”

It sounds like an extract from a matrimonial paper. I wonder how many, or, to speak more accurately, how *few* bachelors would exhibit any anxiety to occupy the vacancy. I might add “private means,” and *then* the answers would arrive in sacks, I should have the offer of a hundred husbands, and a dozen kind homes, with hot and cold water, cheerful society, a post office within a mile, and a golf course in the neighbourhood. A hundred mothers of families would welcome me to their bosoms, and a hundred spinsters would propose the grand tour and intellectual companionship; but I want to be loved for myself, and in return to love, and to help—

I am not thinking of marriage. Some day I shall probably fall in love, like everyone else, and be prepared to go off to the Ural Mountains or Kamtschatka, or any other remote spot, for the privilege of accompanying my Jock. I shall probably be just as mad, and deluded, and happy, and ridiculous as any other girl, when my turn comes; but it hasn't come *yet*, and I'm not going to sit still and twiddle my thumbs pending its approach. I'm in no hurry! It is in my mind that I should prefer a few preliminary independent years.

Aunt Eliza drove over this afternoon to “cheer me up”. She means well, but her cheering capacities are not great. Her mode of attack is first to enlarge on every possible ill, and reduce one to a state of collapse from pure self-pity, and then to proceed to waft the same troubles aside with a casual flick of the hand. She sat down beside me, stroked my hand (I hate being pawed!) and set plaintively to work.

“*Poor dear!* I know you are feeling desolate. It's so hard for you, isn't it, dear, having no other brother or sister? Makes it all the harder, doesn't it, dear! And Kathie *leant* on you so! You must feel that your work is gone. Stranded! That's the feeling, isn't it? I *do* understand. But”—(sudden change to major key)—“*she* is happy! You must forget yourself in her joy!”

I said, "Oh! yes," and removed my hand under pretence of feeling for a handkerchief. Her face lengthened again, and she drew a deep sigh.

(Minor.) "I always feel it is the last straw for a woman when she has to give up her home in a time of trouble. A home is a refuge, and you have made The Clough so charming. It will be a wrench to move all the dear old furniture, and to leave the garden where you and Kathie were so happy together. Wherever you look, poor dear, you must feel a fresh stab. Associations!—so precious, aren't they, to a woman's heart? (Major.) But material things are of *small* value, after all, dear. We learn that as we grow *old*! A true woman can make a home wherever she goes—"

"I—I suppose she can."

(Minor.) "But of course the loneliness *is* a handicap. Having no one who needs you, no one to welcome you home. So sad! Especially in the evenings! Solitary people are apt to grow morose. You will miss Kathie's bright happy ways. (Quick change!) Well! Well! No one *need* be lonely in this world. There are thousands of suffering souls fainting by the wayside for lack of the very help which it is in your power to give. If I could just tell you of some cases I know!"

I pricked up my ears.

"I wish you would. I like to hear about other people's troubles!"

"My dear! Such a startling way of putting things! You don't mean it. I know your tender heart! Of course the worst cases are in the big cities. London, now! Every time I go to London, and travel as one is obliged to do from one end of the city to the other, I look out upon those endless rows and rows of streets of small houses, and at the great towering blocks of flats at every turn, and feel *appalled* at the thought of the misery that goes on inside!"

"And the joy!"

"My dear, what kind of joy *can* there be in such places?"

"Not your kind perhaps, nor mine, but real enough all the same. People love one another, and have their own pleasures and interests. Little clerks come home to little wives and tell of little successes. Women in ugly houses buy some new piece of ugliness, and find it beautiful, and rejoice. Babies toddle about—fat, pretty things, with curly mops."

She stared at me blankly.

“Curly mops! What does it matter whether their hair curls or not? Ah, my dear, in such circumstances children are not all joy. I had a letter from a friend the other day—Lady Templar. We were at school together. Her nephew, Wenham Thorold, has lost his wife. Married at twenty-three. So silly! A clergyman’s daughter, without a sou. Now, of course, she dies, and leaves him with five small children.”

“Very inconsiderate!”

“Very inconvenient for the poor man! Only thirty-five, and a baby in arms. How will it help him if its hair curls? He puts the elder children to bed himself after his day’s work. Quite pathetic to hear of! Wouldn’t he have been happier with one?”

“Possibly—for the present. Later on the five will help *him*, and he will be glad and proud.”

“Children dragged up by strangers are not always a credit and pride. I hope these may be, but—if you’d heard my friend’s tales! They live in a flat. Quite a cheap block in some unfashionable neighbourhood. *No* society. He has one small maid and a housekeeper to look after the children. Most inefficient, Adela says. Holes in their stockings, and shrieks the moment their father is out of the building!”

“What was he like?”

“He? Who? Oh, the poor father! Handsome, she said, but haggard. The Templar nose. Poor, helpless man!”

A horrible feeling surged over me. I felt it rise, swell, crash over my head like a flood of water—a conviction that I was listening to no tale, but to a *call*—that Providence had heard my cry for work, and had answered it in the person of Wenham Thorold—handsome and haggard—in the person of little Thorold girls with holes in their stockings, of little Thorold boys who shrieked, and a Thorold baby with problematic hair that might, or might not, curl.

I cowered at the prospect. All very well to talk of my own way, and my own niche, all very well to dream of fairy wands, and of the soothing, self-ingratiating rôle of transforming other people’s grey into gold, while the said people sat agape, transfixed with gratitude and admiration, *but*—how extraordinarily prosaic and unromantic the process became when worked out in sober black and white. To mend stockings, to stifle shrieks, to be snubbed by a cross housekeeper; probably, in addition, to be sent to Coventry by the handsome and haggard one, under suspicion of

manoeuvring for his affections. Yes, at the slightest interference he would certainly put me down as a designing female, with designs on his hand. At this last thought I sniggered, and Aunt Eliza looked severe.

“No subject for mirth, Evelyn. I’m surprised! *You* who are always talking of wanting to help—”

“But could I help him? I will, if I can. I have money and time, and am longing for work. Could I banish the housekeeper, and introduce a variation by paying to take her place?”

Aunt Eliza looked at the ceiling, and informed it obviously, though dumbly, that when nieces talked nonsense it was waste of breath to reply. Outraged dignity spoke in her rigid back, in the thin contour of her cheek.

“A Wastneys to speak of being a housekeeper!”

I realised that I had gone too far, for to jest at the expense of the family pride was an unpardonable offence, so I added hastily:—

“Or I might take a flat hard by, and do good by stealth! Win the housekeeper’s heart, and then take charge of the five when she gads forth. Some of the other tenants might need help too. In those great big buildings, where scores of families live under one roof, there must always be *somebody* who needs a helping hand. It would be rather a charming rôle to play good fairy to the mansions!”

Even as I spoke a flash of inspiration seemed to light up my dark brain. My own careless words had created a picture which charmed, which intrigued. It was as though a veil had lifted, and I caught sight of beckoning hands. I saw before me a great, grim building, storey after storey rising in unbroken line, the dusty windows staring into the windows of a twin building across the road, just as tall, just as unlovely, just as desolate. I saw a bare entrance hall, in which pale-faced men and women came and went. I passed with them into so-called “homes” where electric light burned day and night, and little children played in nurseries about the size of a comfortable bed. Everybody, as it seemed, was worn down with the burden of the inevitable daily task, so that there was no energy left for beauty, for gaiety, for joy. Suppose—oh, suppose there lived in that building one tenant whose mission it was to supply that need, to be a Happiness-Monger, a Fairy Godmother, a—a—a living bran pie of unexpected and stimulating *helps*.

For the first moment since that motor car turned out of the gate, bearing away the bride and bridegroom, a glow of warmth took the place of the

blank ache in the place where my heart used to be. It hurt a little, just as it hurts when the circulation returns to frozen limbs, but it was a wholesome hurt, a hundred times better than the calm that had gone before. There glowed through my veins the exultation of the martyr. Now farewell to ease and luxury, to personal desires and ambitions. Henceforth I lived only to serve the race!

“Oh, Auntie, it’s a glorious idea. Why didn’t I think of it before? My vocation is ready and waiting for me, but I should never have found it if it hadn’t been for you! Why shouldn’t I take a little flat in some unfashionable block, and play good fairy to my neighbours? A free, unmarried woman is so useful! There ought to be one in every family, a permanent ‘Aunt Mary,’ to lend a hand in its joys and sorrows, its spring cleanings, and its—jams! Nowadays Aunt Marys are so scarce. They are absorbed in their own schemes. Why shouldn’t I take up the rôle, and be a universal fairy to the mansions—devoting my idle time to other people who need me, ready to love and to scold, to bake and to brew, to put my fingers in other people’s pies, leaving behind sugar for them, and pulling out plums for myself of soothing, and comfort, and joy!” My voice broke suddenly. I was awfully lonely, and the thought of those figurative plums cut to the heart. The tears trickled down my cheeks; I forgot where I was, and to whom I was speaking, and just sobbed out all that was in my heart.

“Oh! Oh! To be needed again! To have some one to care for! That would help—that would fill the gap—that would make life worth while.”

Instinctively I stretched out my hands, in appeal for sympathy and understanding.

“Oh, don’t be silly!” said Aunt Eliza.

Chapter Three.

Charmion Fane Intervenes.

During the next days the idea of making my home in London, and playing fairy godmother to the tenants in a block of flats, took an ever-deepening root in my heart. I pondered on it incessantly and worked out plans as to ways and means.

Bridget should go with me as general factotum, for my method of living must be as simple as possible, since the neighbours would be more likely to confide their troubles to the ear of one who was, apparently, in the same position of life as themselves. Smart clothing would be unnecessary also, and a hundred and one luxuries of a leisured life. I mentally drew up a list of things taboo, and regarded it with—let me be honest—lingering regret. I was quite, quite willing to deny myself, but it is folly to pretend that it didn't cost a pang. I *like* good clothes and dainty meals, and motor-cars, and space, and luxury, and people to wait upon me when I'm tired, and unlimited supplies of flowers, and fruit, and hot water, to say nothing of my own little share of variety and fun. Down at the bottom of my heart, a lurking doubt of myself stirred into life, and spoke with insistent voice:—

“All very well, Evelyn, but can you *keep it up*? Are you brave enough, strong enough, unselfish enough to give up all that has hitherto made your life, and to be satisfied with living through others? Won't the time come when nature will rebel, and demand a turn for yourself? And *then*, Evelyn, *then* what are you going to do? Could you ever respect yourself again if, having put your shoulder to the wheel, you drew back and lapsed into selfish indifference?”

As for Aunt Emmeline, she turned on the cold tap, and kept it on at a continuous trickle.

“Exaggerated nonsense! You always *were* exaggerated, Evelyn, from a child. Be kind, of course; that's only your duty, but I call it officious and presumptuous to interfere in other people's lives. *You* of all people! At your age! With your looks—”

“What have my looks to do with it?”

“My dear, it is not your fault, but I've said it before, and I say it again—you are *showy*! There is something about you which makes people stare. Dear Kathie could pass along quietly, or sit in a corner of a room and be

conveniently overlooked, but you—I am not paying you a compliment, my dear, I consider it is a misfortune!—you *take the eye*! Wherever you go, people will notice you and gossip about your movements. At twenty-six, and with your appearance, I ask you candidly, as aunt to niece—*do* you consider yourself a suitable person to live alone, and minister to widowers?”

“Well, if you put it like that, I *don't*! But what of the children who shriek, and have holes in their stockings? Mightn't they like me better just because I *am* young and look nice?”

I laughed as I spoke, but Aunt Emmeline was so pleased that I showed some glimmerings of reason, that she said suavely:—

“Wait ten years, dear! Till your hair is grey! You will age early with those sharp features. In ten or twelve years you can do as you please.”

I thought, but did not say:—

“My dear aunt, but I shall do it *now*!”

A week passed by, while I pondered and worried, and then at last came a “lead” from without. A morning dawned when Bridget brought my letters with my early tea, and set them down on the table by my bed.

“Four letters this morning, and only one of the lot you'll be caring to see.”

Bridget takes a deep interest in my correspondence, and always introduces a letter with a note of warning or congratulation: “That bothering creature is worrying at you again!”

“There's a laugh you'll be having over Master George's fun!”

“You paid that bill before. Don't be letting them come over you with their tricks!”

It is, of course, reprehensible behaviour on the part of a maid, presumptuous, familiar, interfering; but Bridget is Bridget, and I might as soon command her not to use her tongue, as to stop taking an interest in anything that concerns “Herself”. As a matter of fact, I don't try. Servility, and decorum, and a machine-like respect are to be hired for cash at any registry office; but Bridget's red-hot devotion, her child-like, unshakable conviction that everything that Miss Evelyn does and says, or doesn't say and doesn't do, is absolutely right—ah, that is beyond price! No poor forms and ceremony shall stand between Bridget and me!

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