

Helena

Mrs. Humphry Ward

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HELENA

BY MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

AUTHOR OF LADY ROSE'S DAUGHTER, MISSING, ELIZABETH'S CAMPAIGN, ETC.

1919

CHAPTER I

"I don't care a hang about the Middle Classes!" said Lord Buntingford, resting his head on his hand, and slowly drawing a pen over a printed sheet that lay before him. The sheet was headed "Middle Class Defence League," and was an appeal to whom it might concern to join the founders of the League in an attempt to curb the growing rapacity of the working-classes. "Why should we be snuffed out without a struggle?" said the circular. "We are fewer, no doubt, but we are better educated. Our

home traditions are infinitely superior. It is on the Middle Classes that the greatness of England depends."

"Does it?" thought Lord Buntingford irritably. "I wonder."

He rose and began to pace his library, a shabby comfortable room which he loved. The room however had distinction like its master. The distinction came, perhaps, from its few pictures, of no great value, but witnessing to a certain taste and knowledge on the part of the persons, long since dead, who hung them there; from one or two cases of old Nankin; from its old books; and from a faded but enchanting piece of tapestry behind the cases of china, which seemed to represent a forest. The tapestry, which covered the whole of the end wall of the room, was faded and out of repair, but Lord Buntingford, who was a person of artistic sensibilities, was very fond of it, and had never been able to make up his mind to spare it long enough to have it sent to the School of Art Needlework for mending. His cousin, Lady Cynthia Welwyn, scolded him periodically for his negligence in the matter. But after all it was he, and not Cynthia, who had to live in the room. She had something to do with the School, and of course wanted jobs for her workers.

"I hope that good woman's train will be punctual," he thought to himself, presently, as he went to a window and drew up a blind. "Otherwise I shall have no time to look at her before Helena arrives."

He stood awhile absently surveying the prospect outside. There was first of all a garden with some pleasant terraces, and flights of stone steps, planned originally in the grand style, but now rather dilapidated and ill-kept, suggesting either a general shortage of pelf on the part of the owner--or perhaps mere neglect and indifference.

Beyond the garden stretched a green rim of park, with a gleam of water in the middle distance which seemed to mean either a river or a pond, many fine scattered trees, and, girdling the whole, a line of wooded hill. Just such a view as any county--almost--in this beautiful England can produce. It was one of the first warm days of a belated spring. A fortnight before, park and hills and garden had been deep in snow. Now Nature, eager, and one might think ashamed, was rushing at her neglected work, determined to set the full spring going in a minimum of hours. The grass seemed to be growing, and the trees leafing under the spectator's eyes. There was already a din of cuckoos in the park, and the nesting birds were busy.

The scene was both familiar and unfamiliar to Lord Buntingford. He had been brought up in it as a child. But he had only inherited the Beechmark property from his uncle just before the war, and during almost the whole of the war he had been so hard at work, as a volunteer in the Admiralty, that he had never been able to do more than run down once or twice a year to see his agent, go over his home farm, and settle what timber was to be cut before the Government commandeered it. He was not yet demobilized, as his naval uniform showed. There was a good deal of work still to do in his particular office, and he was more than willing to do it. But in a few months' time at any rate--he was just now taking a fortnight's leave--he would be once more at a loose end. That condition of things must be altered as soon as possible. When he looked back over the years of driving work through which he had just passed to the years of semi-occupation before them, he shrank from those old conditions in disgust. Something must be found to which he could enslave himself again. Liberty was the great delusion--at least for him.

Politics?--Well, there was the House of Lords, and the possibility of some minor office, when his Admiralty work was done. And the whole post-war situation was only too breathless. But for a man who, as soon as he had said Yes, was immediately seized with an insensate desire to look once more at all the reasons which might have induced him to say No, there was no great temptation in politics. Work was what the nation wanted--not talk.

Agriculture and the Simple Life?--Hardly! Five years of life in London, four of them under war conditions, had spoiled any taste for the country he had ever possessed. He meant to do his duty by his estate, and by the miscellaneous crowd of people, returned soldiers and others, who seemed to wish to settle upon it. But to take the plunge seriously, to go in heart and soul for intensive culture or scientific dairy-farming, to spend lonely winters in the country with his bailiffs and tenants for company--it was no good talking about it--he knew it could not be done.

And--finally--what was the good of making plans at all?--with these new responsibilities which friendship and pity and weakness of will had lately led him to take upon himself?--For two years at least he would not be able to plan his life in complete freedom.

His thoughts went dismally off in the new direction. As he turned away from the window, a long Venetian mirror close by reflected the image of a tall man in naval uniform, with a head and face that were striking rather than handsome--black curly hair just dusted with grey, a slight chronic frown, remarkable blue eyes and a short silky beard. His legs were slender in proportion to the breadth of his shoulders, and inadequate in relation to the dignity of the head. One of them also was slightly--very slightly--lame.

He wandered restlessly round the room again, stopping every now and then with his hands in his pockets, to look at the books on the shelves. Generally, he did not take in what he was looking at, but in a moment less absent-minded than others, he happened to notice the name of a stately octavo volume just opposite his eyes--

"Davison, on Prophecy."

"Damn Davison!"--he said to himself, with sudden temper. The outburst seemed to clear his mind. He went to the bell and rang it. A thin woman in a black dress appeared, a woman with a depressed and deprecating expression which was often annoying to Lord Buntingford. It represented somehow an appeal to the sentiment of the spectator for which there was really no sufficient ground. Mrs. Mawson was not a widow, in spite of the Mrs. She was a well-paid and perfectly healthy person; and there was no reason, in Lord Buntingford's view, why she should not enjoy life. All the same, she was very efficient and made him comfortable. He would have raised her wages to preposterous heights to keep her.

"Is everything ready for the two ladies, Mrs. Mawson?"

"Everything, my Lord. We are expecting the pony-cart directly."

"And the car has been ordered for Miss Pitstone?"

"Oh, yes, my Lord, long ago."

"Gracious! Isn't that the cart!"

There was certainly a sound of wheels outside. Lord Buntingford hurried to a window which commanded the drive.

"That's her! I must go and meet her."

He went into the hall, reaching the front door just as the pony-cart drew up with a lady in black sitting beside the driver. Mrs. Mawson looked after him. She wondered why his lordship was in such a flurry. "It's this living alone. He isn't used to have women about. And it's a pity he didn't stay on as he was."

Meanwhile the lady in the pony-cart, as she alighted, saw a tall man, of somewhat remarkable appearance, standing on the steps of the porch. Her expectations had been modest; and that she would be welcomed by her employer in person on the doorstep of Beechmark had not been among them. Her face flushed, and a pair of timid eyes met those of Lord Buntingford as they shook hands.

"The train was very late," she explained in a voice of apology.

"They always are," said Lord Buntingford. "Never mind. You are in quite good time. Miss Pitstone hasn't arrived. Norris, take Mrs. Friend's luggage upstairs."

An ancient man-servant appeared. The small and delicately built lady on the step looked at him appealingly.

"I am afraid there is a box besides," she said, like one confessing a crime. "Not a big one--" she added hurriedly. "We had to leave it at the station. The groom left word for it to be brought later."

"Of course. The car will bring it," said Lord Buntingford. "Only one box and those bags?" he asked, smiling. "Why, that's most moderate. Please come in."

And he led the way to the drawing-room. Reassured by his kind voice and manner, Mrs. Friend tripped after him. "What a charming man!" she thought.

It was a common generalization about Lord Buntingford. Mrs. Friend had still--like others--to discover that it did not take one very far.

In the drawing-room, which was hung with French engravings mostly after Watteau, and boasted a faded Aubusson carpet, a tea-table was set out. Lord Buntingford, having pushed forward a seat for his guest, went towards the tea-table, and then thought better of it.

"Perhaps you'll pour out tea--" he said pleasantly. "It'll be your function, I think--and I always forget something."

Mrs. Friend took her seat obediently in front of the tea-table and the Georgian silver upon it, which had a look of age and frailty as though generations of butlers had rubbed it to the bone, and did her best not to show the nervousness she felt. She was very anxious to please her new employer.

"I suppose Miss Pitstone will be here before long?" she ventured, when

she had supplied both the master of the house and herself.

"Twenty minutes--" said Lord Buntingford, looking at his watch. "Time enough for me to tell you a little more about her than I expect you know."

And again his smile put her at ease.

She bent forward, clasping her small hands.

"Please do! It would be a great help."

He noticed the delicacy of the hands, and of her slender body. The face attracted him--its small neat features, and brown eyes. Clearly a lady--that was something.

"Well, I shouldn't wonder--if you found her a handful," he said deliberately.

Mrs. Friend laughed--a little nervous laugh.

"Is she--is she very advanced?"

"Uncommonly--I believe. I may as well tell you candidly she didn't want to come here at all. She wanted to go to college. But her mother, who was a favourite cousin of mine, wished it. She died last autumn; and Helena promised her that she would allow me to house her and look after her for two years. But she regards it as a dreadful waste of time."

"I think--in your letter--you said I was to help her--in modern languages--" murmured Mrs. Friend.

Lord Buntingford shrugged his shoulders--

"I have no doubt you could help her in a great many things. Young people, who know her better than I do, say she's very clever. But her mother and she were always wandering about--before the war--for her mother's health. I don't believe she's been properly educated in anything. Of course one can't expect a girl of nineteen to behave like a schoolgirl. If you can induce her to take up some serious reading--Oh, I don't mean anything tremendous!--and to keep up her music---I expect that's all her poor mother would have wanted. When we go up to town you must take her to concerts--the opera--that kind of thing. I dare say it will go all right!" But the tone was one of resignation, rather than certainty.

"I'll do my best--" began Mrs. Friend.

"I'm sure you will. But--well, we'd better be frank with each other. Helena's very handsome--very self-willed--and a good bit of an heiress. The difficulty will be--quite candidly--_lovers_!"

They both laughed. Lord Buntingford took out his cigarette case.

"You don't mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all."

"Won't you have one yourself?" He held out the case. Mrs. Friend did not smoke. But she inwardly compared the gesture and the man with the

forbidding figure of the old woman in Lancaster Gate with whom she had just completed two years of solitary imprisonment, and some much-baffled vitality in her began to revive.

Lord Buntingford threw himself back in his arm-chair, and watched the curls of smoke for a short space--apparently in meditation.

"Of course it's no good trying the old kind of thing--strict chaperonage and that sort of business," he said at last. "The modern girl won't stand it."

"No, indeed she won't!" said Mrs. Friend fervently. "I should like to tell you--I've just come from ----" She named a university. "I went to see a cousin of mine, who's in one of the colleges there. She's going to teach. She went up just before the war. Then she left to do some war work, and now she's back again. She says nobody knows what to do with the girls. All the old rules have just--gone!" The gesture of the small hand was expressive. "Authority--means nothing. The girls are entering for the sports--just like the men. They want to run the colleges--as they please--and make all the rules themselves."

"Oh, I know--" broke in her companion. "They'll just allow the wretched teachers and professors to teach--what their majesties choose to learn. Otherwise--they run the show."

"Of course, they're awfully nice girls--most of them," said Mrs. Friend, with a little, puzzled wrinkling of the brow.

"Ripping! Done splendid war work and all that. But the older generation, now that things have begun again, are jolly well up a tree--how to fit the new to the old. I have some elderly relations at Oxbridge--a nice old professor and his wife. Not stick-in-the-muds at all. But they tell me the world there--where the young women are concerned--seems to be standing on its head. Well!--as far as I can gather--I really know her very slightly--my little cousin Helena's in just the same sort of stage. All we people over forty might as well make our wills and have done with it. They'll soon discover some kind device for putting us out of the way. They've no use for us. And yet at the same time"--he flung his cigarette into the wood-fire beside him--"the fathers and mothers who brought them into the world will insist on clucking after them, or if they can't cluck themselves, making other people cluck. I shall have to try and cluck after Helena. It's absurd, and I shan't succeed, of course--how could I? But as I told you, her mother was a dear woman--and--"

His sentence stopped abruptly. Mrs. Friend thought--"he was in love with her." However, she got no further light on the matter. Lord Buntingford rose, and lit another cigarette.

"I must go and write a letter before post. Well, you see, you and I have got to do our best. Of course, you mustn't try and run her on a tight rein--you'd be thrown before you were out of the first field--" His blue eyes smiled down upon the little stranger lady. "And you mustn't spy upon her. But if you're really in difficulties, come to me. We'll make out, somehow. And now, she'll be here in a few minutes. Would you like to stay here--or shall I ring for the housemaid to show you your room?"

"Thank you--I--think I'll stay here. Can I find a book?"

She looked round shyly.

"Scores. There are some new books"--he pointed to a side-table where the obvious contents of a Mudie box, with some magazines, were laid out--"and if you want old ones, that door"--he waved towards one at the far end of the room--"will take you into the library. My great-grandfather's collection--not mine! And then one has ridiculous scruples about burning them! However, you'll find a few nice ones. Please make yourself at home!" And with a slight bow to her, the first sign in him of those manners of the _grand seigneur_ she had vaguely expected, he was moving away, when she said hurriedly, pursuing her own thought:

"You said Miss Pitstone was very good-looking?"

"Oh, very!" He laughed. "She's exactly like Romney's Lady Hamilton. You know the type?"

"Ye-es," said Mrs. Friend. "I think I remember--before the war--at Agnew's? My husband took me there once." The tone was hesitating. The little lady was clearly not learned in English art. But Lord Buntingford liked her the better for not pretending.

"Of course. There's always an Emma, when Old Masters are on show. Romney painted her forty or fifty times. We've got one ourselves--a sketch my grandfather bought. If you'll come into the hall I'll show it you."

She followed obediently and, in a rather dark corner of the hall, Lord Buntingford pointed out an unfinished sketch of Lady Hamilton--one of the many Bacchante variants--the brown head bent a little under the ivy leaves in the hair, the glorious laughing eyes challenging the spectator.

"Is she like that?" asked Mrs. Friend, wondering.

"Who?--my ward?" laughed Lord Buntingford. "Well, you'll see."

He walked away, and Mrs. Friend stayed a few minutes more in front of the picture--thinking--and with half an ear listening for the sound of a motor. She was full of tremors and depression. "I was a fool to come--a fool to accept!" she thought. The astonishing force of the sketch--of the creature sketched--intimidated her. If Helena Pitstone were really like that--"How can she ever put up with me? She'll just despise me. It will be only natural. And then if things go wrong, Lord Buntingford will find out I'm no good--and I shall have to go!"

She gave a long sigh, lifting her eyes a little--against her will--to the reflection of herself in an old mirror hanging beside the Romney. What a poor little insignificant figure--beside the other! No, she had no confidence in herself--none at all--she never had had. The people she had lived with had indeed generally been fond of her. It was because she made herself useful to them. Old Mrs. Browne had professed affection for her,--till she gave notice. She turned with a shiver from the recollection of an odious scene.

She went bade to the drawing-room and thence to the library, looking wistfully, as she passed through it, at the pleasant hall, with its old furniture, and its mellowed comfort. She would like to find a home here, if only they would put up with her. For she was very homeless.

As compared with the drawing-room, the library had been evidently lived in. Its books and shabby chairs seemed to welcome her, and the old

tapestry delighted her. She stood some minutes before it in a quiet pleasure, dreaming herself into the forest, and discovering an old castle in its depths. Then she noticed a portrait of an old man, labelled as by "Frank Holl, R. A.," hanging over the mantelpiece. She supposed it was the grandfather who had collected the books. The face and hair of the old man had blanched indeed to a singular whiteness; but the eyes, blue under strong eyebrows, with their concentrated look, were the eyes of the Lord Buntingford with whom she had just been talking.

The hoot of a motor startled her, and she ran to a window which commanded the drive. An open car was rapidly approaching. A girl was driving it, with a man in chauffeur's uniform sitting behind her. She brought the car smartly up to the door, then instantly jumped out, lifted the bonnet, and stood with the chauffeur at her side, eagerly talking to him and pointing to something in the chassis. Mrs. Friend saw Lord Buntingford run down the steps to greet his ward. She gave him a smile and a left hand, and went on talking. Lord Buntingford stood by, twisting his moustache, till she had finished. Then the chauffeur, looking flushed and sulky, got into the car, and the girl with Lord Buntingford ascended the steps. Mrs. Friend left the window, and hurriedly went back to the drawing-room, where tea was still spread. Through the drawing-room door she heard a voice from the hall full of indignant energy.

"You ought to sack that man, Cousin Philip. He's spoiling that beautiful car of yours."

"Is he? He suits me. Have you been scolding him all the way?"

"Well, I told him a few things--in your interest." Lord Buntingford laughed. A few words followed in lowered tones.

"He is telling her about me," thought Mrs. Friend, and presently caught a chuckle, very merry and musical, which brought an involuntary smile to her own eyes. Then the door was thrown back, and Lord Buntingford ushered in his ward.

"This is Mrs. Friend, Helena. She arrived just before you did."

The girl advanced with sudden gravity and offered her hand. Mrs. Friend was conscious that the eyes behind the hand were looking her all over.

Certainly a dazzling creature!--with the ripe red and white, the astonishing eyes, and brown hair, touched with auburn, of the Romney sketch. The beautiful head was set off by a khaki close cap, carrying a badge, and the khaki uniform, tunic, short skirt, and leggings, might have been specially designed to show the health and symmetry of the girl's young form. She seemed to walk on air, and her presence transformed the quiet old room.

"I want some tea badly," said Miss Pitstone, throwing herself into a chair, "and so would you, Cousin Philip, if you had been battling with four grubby children and an idiot mother all the way from London. They made me play 'beasts' with them. I didn't mind that, because my roaring frightened them. But then they turned me into a fish, and fished for me with the family umbrellas. I had distinctly the worst of it." And she took off her cap, turning it round on her hand, and looking at the dints in it with amusement.

"Oh, no, you never get the worst of it!" said Lord Buntingford, laughing,

as he handed her the cake. "You couldn't if you tried."

She looked up sharply. Then she turned to Mrs. Friend.

"That's the way my guardian treats me, Mrs. Friend. How can I take him seriously?"

"I think Lord Buntingford meant it as a compliment--didn't he?" said Mrs. Friend shyly. She knew, alack, that she had no gift for repartee.

"Oh, no, he never pays compliments--least of all to me. He has a most critical, fault-finding mind. Haven't you, Cousin Philip?"

"What a charge!" said Lord Buntingford, lighting another cigarette. "It won't take Mrs. Friend long to find out its absurdity."

"It will take her just twenty-four hours," said the girl stoutly. "He used to terrify me, Mrs. Friend, when I was a little thing ... May I have some tea, please? When he came to see us, I always knew before he had been ten minutes in the room that my hair was coming down, or my shoes were untied, or something dreadful was the matter with me. I can't imagine how we shall get on, now that he is my guardian. I shall put him in a temper twenty times a day."

"Ah, but the satisfactory thing now is that you will have to put up with my remarks. I have a legal right now to say what I like."

"H'm," said Helena, demurring, "if there are legal rights nowadays."

"There, Mrs. Friend--you hear?" said Lord Buntingford, toying with his cigarette, in the depths of a big chair, and watching his ward with eyes of evident enjoyment. "You've got a Bolshevist to look after--a real anarchist. I'm sorry for you."

"That's another of his peculiarities!" said the girl coolly, "queering the pitch before one begins. You know you might like me!--some people do--but he'll never let you." And, bending forward, with her cup in both hands, and her radiant eyes peering over the edge of it, she threw a most seductive look at her new chaperon. The look seemed to say, "I've been taking stock of you, and--well!--I think I shan't mind you."

Anyway, Mrs. Friend took it as a feeler and a friendly one. She stammered something in reply, and then sat silent while guardian and ward plunged into a war of chaff in which first the ward, but ultimately the guardian, got the better. Lord Buntingford had more resource and could hold out longer, so that at last Helena rose impatiently:

"I don't feel that I have been at all prettily welcomed--have I, Mrs. Friend? Lord Buntingford never allows one a single good mark. He says I have been idle all the winter since the Armistice. I haven't. I've worked like a nigger!"

"How many dances a week, Helena?--and how many boys?" Helena first made a face, and then laughed out.

"As many dances--of course--as one could stuff in--without taxis. I could walk down most of the boys. But Hampstead, Chelsea, and Curzon Street, all in one night, and only one bus between them--that did sometimes do for me."

"When did you set up this craze?"

"Just about Christmas--I hadn't been to a dance for a year. I had been slaving at canteen work all day"--she turned to Mrs. Friend--"and doing chauffeur by night--you know--fetching wounded soldiers from railway stations. And then somebody asked me to a dance, and I went. And next morning I just made up my mind that everything else in the world was rot, and I would go to a dance every night. So I chucked the canteen and I chucked a good deal of the driving--except by day--and I just dance--and dance!"

Suddenly she began to whistle a popular waltz--and the next minute the two elder people found themselves watching open-mouthed the whirling figure of Miss Helena Pitstone, as, singing to herself, and absorbed apparently in some new and complicated steps, she danced down the whole length of the drawing-room and back again. Then out of breath, with a curtsey and a laugh, she laid a sudden hand on Mrs. Friend's arm.

"Will you come and talk to me--before dinner? I can't talk--before him. Guardians are impossible people!" And with another mock curtsey to Lord Buntingford, she hurried Mrs. Friend to the door, and then disappeared.

Her guardian, with a shrug of the shoulders, walked to his writing-table, and wrote a hurried note.

"My dear Geoffrey--I will send to meet you at Dansworth to-morrow by the train you name. Helena is here--very mad and very beautiful. I hope you will stay over Sunday. Yours ever, Buntingford."

"He shall have his chance anyway," he thought, "with the others. A fair field, and no pulling."

CHAPTER II

"There is only one bathroom in this house, and it is a day's journey to find it," said Helena, re-entering her own bedroom, where she had left Mrs. Friend in a dimity-covered arm-chair by the window, while she reconnoitred. "Also, the water is only a point or two above freezing--and as I like boiling--"

She threw herself down on the floor by Mrs. Friend's side. All her movements had a curious certainty and grace like those of a beautiful animal, but the whole impression of her was still formidable to the gentle creature who was about to undertake what already seemed to her the absurd task of chaperoning anything so independent and self-confident. But the girl clearly wished to make friends with her new companion, and began eagerly to ask questions.

"How did you hear of me? Do you mind telling me?"

"Just through an agency," said Mrs. Friend, flushing a little. "I wanted to leave the situation I was in, and the agency told me Lord Buntingford was looking for a companion for his ward, and I was to go and see Lady Mary Chance--"

The girl's merry laugh broke out:

"Oh, I know Mary Chance--twenty pokers up her backbone! I should have thought--"

Then she stopped, looking intently at Mrs. Friend, her brows drawn together over her brilliant eyes.

"What would you have thought?" Mrs. Friend enquired, as the silence continued.

"Well--that if she was going to recommend somebody to Cousin Philip--to look after me, she would never have been content with anything short of a Prussian grenadier in petticoats. She thinks me a demon. She won't let her daughters go about with me. I can't imagine how she ever fixed upon anyone so--"

"So what?" said Mrs. Friend, after a moment, nervously. Lost in the big white arm-chair, her small hand propping her small face and head, she looked even frailer than she had looked in the library.

"Well, nobody would ever take you for my jailer, would they?" said Helena, surveying her.

Mrs. Friend laughed--a ghost of a laugh, which yet seemed to have some fun in it, far away.

"Does this seem to you like prison?"

"This house? Oh, no. Of course I shall do just as I like in it. I have only come because--well, my poor Mummy made a great point of it when she was ill, and I couldn't be a brute to her, so I promised. But I wonder whether I ought to have promised. It is a great tyranny, you know--the tyranny of sick people. I wonder whether one ought to give in to her?"

The girl looked up coolly. Mrs. Friend felt as though she had been struck.

"But your mother!" she said involuntarily.

"Oh, I know, that's what most people would say. But the question is, what's reasonable. Well, I wasn't reasonable, and here I am. But I make my conditions. We are not to be more than four months in the year in this old hole"--she looked round her in not unkindly amusement at the bare old-fashioned room; "we are to have four or five months in London, at least; and when travelling abroad gets decent again, we are to go abroad--Rome, perhaps, next winter. And I am jolly well to ask my friends here, or in town--male and female--and Cousin Philip promised to be nice to them. He said, of course, 'Within limits.' But that we shall see. I'm not a pauper, you know. My trustees pay Lord Buntingford whatever I cost him, and I shall have a good deal to spend. I shall have a horse--and perhaps a little motor. The chauffeur here is a fractious idiot. He has done that Rolls-Royce car of Cousin Philip's balmy, and cut up quite rough when I spoke to him about it."

"Done it what?" said Mrs. Friend faintly.

"Balmy. Don't you know that expression?" Helena, on the floor with her

hands under her knees, watched her companion's looks with a grin. "It's our language now, you know--English--the language of us young people. The old ones have got to learn it, as we speak it! Well, what do you think of Cousin Philip?"

Mrs. Friend roused herself.

"I've only seen him for half an hour. But he was very kind."

"And isn't he good-looking?" said the girl before her, with enthusiasm. "I just adore that combination of black hair and blue eyes--don't you? But he isn't by any means as innocent as he looks."

"I never said--"

"No. I know you didn't," said Helena serenely; "but you might have--and he isn't innocent a bit. He's as complex as you make 'em. Most women are in love with him, except me!" The brown eyes stared meditatively out of window. "I suppose I could be if I tried. But he doesn't attract me. He's too old."

"Old?" repeated Mrs. Friend, with astonishment.

"Well, I don't mean he's decrepit! But he's forty-four if he's a day--more than double my age. Did you notice that he's a little lame?"

"No!"

"He is. It's very slight--an accident, I believe--somewhere abroad. But they wouldn't have him for the Army, and he was awfully cut up. He used to come and sit with Mummy every day and pour out his woes. I suppose she was the only person to whom he ever talked about his private affairs--he knew she was safe. Of course you know he is a widower?"

Mrs. Friend knew nothing. But she was vaguely surprised.

"Oh, well, a good many people know that--though Mummy always said she never came across anybody who had ever seen his wife. He married her when he was quite a boy---abroad somewhere--when there seemed no chance of his ever being Lord Buntingford--he had two elder brothers who died--and she was an art student on her own. An old uncle of Mummy's once told me that when Cousin Philip came back from abroad--she died abroad--after her death, he seemed altogether changed somehow. But he never, never speaks of her"--the girl swayed her slim body backwards and forwards for emphasis--"and I wouldn't advise you or anybody else to try. Most people think he's just a bachelor. I never talk about it to people--Mummy said I wasn't to--and as he was very nice to Mummy--well, I don't. But I thought you'd better know. And now I think we'd better dress."

But instead of moving, she looked down affectionately at her uniform and her neat brown leggings.

"What a bore! I suppose I've no right to them any more."

"What is your uniform?"

"Women Ambulance Drivers. Don't you know the hostel in Ruby Square? I bargained with Cousin Philip after Mummy's death I should stay out my time, till I was demobbed. Awfully jolly time I had--on the whole--though

the girls were a mixed lot. Well--let's get a move on." She sprang up. "Your room's next door."

Mrs. Friend was departing when Helena enquired:

"By the way--have you ever heard of Cynthia Welwyn?"

Mrs. Friend turned at the door, and shook her head.

"Oh, well, I can tot her up very quickly--just to give you an idea--as she's coming to dinner. She's fair and forty--just about Buntingford's age--quite good-looking--quite clever--lives by herself, reads a great deal--runs the parish--you know the kind of thing. They swarm! I think she would like to marry Cousin Philip, if he would let her."

Mrs. Friend hurriedly shut the door at her back, which had been slightly ajar. Helena laughed--the merry but very soft laugh Mrs. Friend had first heard in the hall--a laugh which seemed somehow out of keeping with the rest of its owner's personality.

"Don't be alarmed. I doubt whether that would be news to anybody in this house! But Buntingford's quite her match. Well, ta-ta. Shall I come and help you dress?"

"The idea!" cried Mrs. Friend. "Shall I help you?" She looked round the room and at Helena vigorously tackling the boxes. "I thought you had a maid?"

"Not at all. I couldn't be bored with one."

"Do let me help you!"

"Then you'd be my maid, and I should bully you and detest you. You must go and dress."

And Mrs. Friend found herself gently pushed out of the room. She went to her own in some bewilderment. After having been immured for some three years in close attendance on an invalided woman shut up in two rooms, she was like a person walking along a dark road and suddenly caught in the glare of motor lamps. Brought into contact with such a personality as Helena Pitstone promised to be, she felt helpless and half blind. A survival, too; for this world into which she had now stepped was one quite new to her. Yet when she had first shut herself up in Lancaster Gate she had never been conscious of any great difference between herself and other women or girls. She had lived a very quiet life in a quiet home before the war. Her father, a hard-working Civil Servant on a small income, and her mother, the daughter of a Wesleyan Minister, had brought her up strictly, yet with affection. The ways of the house were old-fashioned, dictated by an instinctive dislike of persons who went often to theatres and dances, of women who smoked, or played bridge, or indulged in loud, slangy talk. Dictated, too, by a pervading "worship of ancestors," of a preceding generation of plain evangelical men and women, whose books survived in the little house, and whose portraits hung upon its walls.

Then, in the first year of the war, she had married a young soldier, the son of family friends, like-minded with her own people, a modest, inarticulate fellow, who had been killed at Festubert. She had loved him--oh, yes, she had loved him. But sometimes, looking back, she was

troubled to feel how shadowy he had become to her. Not in the region of emotion. She had pined for his fondness all these years; she pined for it still. But intellectually. If he had lived, how would he have felt towards all these strange things that the war had brought about--the revolutionary spirit everywhere, the changes come and coming? She did not know; she could not imagine. And it troubled her that she could not find any guidance for herself in her memories of him.

And as to the changes in her own sex, they seemed to have all come about while she was sitting in a twilight room reading aloud to an old woman. Only a few months after her husband's death her parents had both died, and she found herself alone in the world, and almost penniless. She was not strong enough for war work, the doctor said, and so she had let the doors of Lancaster Gate close upon her, only looking for something quiet and settled--even if it were a settled slavery.

After which, suddenly, just about the time of the Armistice, she had become aware that nothing was the same; that the women and the girls--so many of them in uniform!--that she met in the streets when she took her daily walk--were new creatures; not attractive to her as a whole, but surprising and formidable, because of the sheer life there was in them. And she herself began to get restive; to realize that she was not herself so very old, and to want to know--a hundred things! It had taken her five months, however, to make up her mind; and then at last she had gone to an agency--the only way she knew--and had braved the cold and purely selfish wrath of the household she was leaving. And now here she was in Lord Buntingford's house--Miss Helena Pitstone's chaperon. As she stood before her looking-glass, fastening her little black dress with shaking fingers, the first impression of Helena's personality was upon her, running through her, like wine to the unaccustomed. She supposed that now girls were all like this--all such free, wild, uncurbed creatures, a law to themselves. One moment she repeated that she was a fool to have come; and the next, she would not have found herself back in Lancaster Gate for the world.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Helena was putting on a tea-gown, a white and silver "confection," with a little tail like a fish, and a short skirt tapering down to a pair of slim legs and shapely feet. After all her protestations, she had allowed the housemaid to help her unpack, and when the dress was on she had sent Mary flying down to the drawing-room to bring up some carnations she had noticed there. When these had been tucked into her belt, and the waves of her brown hair had been somehow pinned and coiled into a kind of order, and she had discovered and put on her mother's pearls, she was pleased with herself, or rather with as much of herself as she could see in the inadequate looking-glass on the toilet-table. A pier-glass from somewhere was of course the prime necessity, and must be got immediately. Meanwhile she had to be content with seeing herself in the eyes of the housemaid, who was clearly dazzled by her appearance.

Then there were a few minutes before dinner, and she ran along the passage to Mrs. Friend's room.

"May I come in? Oh, let me tie that for you?" And before Mrs. Friend could interpose, the girl's nimble fingers had tied the narrow velvet carrying a round locket which was her chaperon's only ornament. Drawing back a little, she looked critically at the general effect. Mrs. Friend

flushed, and presently started in alarm, when Helena took up the comb lying on the dressing-table.

"What are you going to do?"

"Only just to alter your hair a little. Do you mind? Do let me. You look so nice in black. But your hair is too tight."

Mrs. Friend stood paralysed, while with a few soft touches Helena applied the comb.

"Now, isn't that nice! I declare it's charming! Now look at yourself. Why should you make yourself look dowdy? It's all very well--but you can't be much older than I am!"

And dancing round her victim, Helena effected first one slight improvement and then another in Mrs. Friend's toilette, till the little woman, standing in uneasy astonishment before the glass to which Helena had dragged her, plucked up courage at last to put an end to the proceedings.

"No, please don't!" she said, with decision, warding off the girl's meddling hand, and putting back some of the quiet bands of hair. "You mustn't make me look so unlike myself. And besides--I couldn't live up to it!" Her shy smile broke out.

"Oh, yes, you could. You're quite nice-looking. I wonder if you'd mind telling me how old you are? And must I always call you 'Mrs. Friend'? It is so odd--when everybody calls each other by their Christian names."

"I don't mind--I don't mind at all. But don't you think--for both our sakes--you'd better leave me all the dignity you can?" Laughter was playing round the speaker's small pale lips, and Helena answered it with interest.

"Does that mean that you'll have to manage me? Did Cousin Philip tell you you must? But that--I may as well tell you at once--is a vain delusion. Nobody ever managed me! Oh, yes, my superior officer in the Women's Corps--she was master. But that was because I chose to make her so. Now I'm on my own--and all I can offer--I'm afraid!--is an alliance--offensive and defensive."

Mrs. Friend looked at the radiant vision opposite to her with its hands on its sides, and slowly shook her head.

"Offensive--against whom?"

"Cousin Philip--if necessary."

Mrs. Friend again shook her head.

"Oh, you're in his pocket already!" cried Helena with a grimace. "But never mind. I'm sure I shall like you. You'll come over to my side soon."

"Why should I take any side?" asked Mrs. Friend, drawing on a pair of black gloves.

"Well, because"--said Helena slowly--"Cousin Philip doesn't like some of my pals--some of the men, I mean--I go about with--and we _may_ quarrel

about it. The question is which of them I'm going to marry--if I marry any of them. And some of them are married. Don't look shocked! Oh, heavens, there's the gong! But we'll sit up to-night, if you're not sleepy, and I'll give you a complete catalogue of some of their qualifications--physical, intellectual, financial. Then you'll have the _carte du pays_. Two of them are coming to-morrow for the Sunday. There's nobody coming to-night of the least interest. Cynthia Welwyn, Captain Vivian Lodge, Buntingford's cousin--rather a prig--but good-looking. A girl or two, no doubt--probably the parson--probably the agent. Now you know. Shall we go down?"

* * * * *

The library was already full when the two ladies entered. Mrs. Friend was aware of a tall fair woman, beautifully dressed in black, standing by Lord Buntingford; of an officer in uniform, resplendent in red tabs and decorations, talking to a spare grey-haired man, who might be supposed to be the agent; of a man in a round collar and clerical coat, standing awkward and silent by the tall lady in black; and of various other girls and young men.

All eyes were turned to Helena as she entered, and she was soon surrounded, while Lord Buntingford took special care of Helena's companion. Mrs. Friend found herself introduced to Lady Cynthia Welwyn, the tall lady in black; to Mr. Parish, the grey-haired man, and to the clergyman. Lady Cynthia bestowed on her a glance from a pair of prominent eyes, and a few civil remarks, Mr. Parish made her an old-fashioned bow, and hoped she had not found the journey too dusty, while the clergyman, whose name she caught as Mr. Alcott, showed a sudden animation as they shook hands, and had soon put her at her ease by a manner in which she at once divined a special sympathy for the stranger within the gates.

"You have just come, I gather?"

"I only arrived this afternoon."

"And you are to look after Miss Helena?" he smiled.

Mrs. Friend smiled too.

"I hope so. If she will let me!"

"She is a radiant creature!" And for a moment he stood watching the girl, as she stood, goddess-like, amid her group of admirers. His eyes were deep-set and tired; his scanty grizzled hair fell untidily over a furrowed brow; and his clothes were neither fresh nor well-brushed. But there was something about him which attracted the lonely; and Mrs. Friend was glad when she found herself assigned to him.

But though her neighbour was not difficult to talk to, her surroundings were so absorbing to her that she talked very little at dinner. It was enough to listen and look--at Lady Cynthia on Lord Buntingford's right hand, and Helena Pitstone on his left; or at the handsome officer with whom Helena seemed to be happily flirting through a great part of dinner. Lady Cynthia was extremely good-looking, and evidently agreeable, though it seemed to Mrs. Friend that Lord Buntingford only gave her divided attention. Meanwhile it was very evident that he himself was the centre of his own table, the person of whom everyone at it was fundamentally aware, however apparently busy with other people. She herself observed

him much more closely than before, the mingling in his face of a kind of concealed impatience, an eagerness held in chains and expressed by his slight perpetual frown, with a courtesy and urbanity generally gay or bantering, but at times, and by flashes--or so it seemed to her--dipped in a sudden, profound melancholy, like a quenched light. He held himself sharply erect, and in his plain naval uniform, with the three Commander's stripes on the sleeve, made, in her eyes, an even more distinguished figure than the gallant and decorated hero on his left, with whom Helena seemed to be so particularly engaged, "prig" though she had dubbed him.

As to Lady Cynthia's effect upon her host, Mrs. Friend could not make up her mind. He seemed attentive or amused while she chatted to him; but towards the end their conversation languished a good deal, and Lady Cynthia must needs fall back on the stubby-haired boy to her right, who was learning agency business with Mr. Parish. She smiled at him also, for it was her business, Mrs. Friend thought, to smile at everybody, but it was an absent-minded smile.

"You don't know Lord Buntingford?" said Mr. Alcott's rather muffled voice beside her.

Mrs. Friend turned hastily.

"No--I never saw him till this afternoon."

"He isn't easy to know. I know him very little, though he gave me this living, and I have business with him, of course, occasionally. But this I do know, the world is uncommonly full of people--don't you find it so?--who say 'I go, Sir'--and don't go. Well, if Lord Buntingford says 'I go, Sir'--he does go!"

"Does he often say it?" asked Mrs. Friend. And the man beside her noticed the sudden gleam in her quiet little face, that rare or evanescent sprite of laughter or satire that even the dwellers in Lancaster Gate had occasionally noticed.

Mr. Alcott considered.

"Well, no," he said at last. "I admit he's difficult to catch. He likes his own ways a great deal better than other people's. But if you do catch him--if you do persuade him--well, then you can stake your bottom dollar on him. At least, that's my experience. He's been awfully generous about land here--put a lot in my hands to distribute long before the war ended. Some of the neighbours about--other landlords--were very sick--thought he'd given them away because of the terms. They sent him a round robin. I doubt if he read it. In a thing like that he's adamant. And he's adamant, too, when he's once taken a real dislike to anybody. There's no moving him."

"You make me afraid!" said Mrs. Friend.

"Oh, no, you needn't be--" Mr. Alcott turned almost eagerly to look at her. "I hope you won't be. He's the kindest of men. It's extraordinarily kind of him--don't you think?"--the speaker smilingly lowered his voice--"taking on Miss Pitstone like this? It's a great responsibility."

Mrs. Friend made the slightest timid gesture of assent.

"Ah, well, it's just like him. He was devoted to her mother--and for his

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