

ELLEN

SHE had now been a waitress at the little *café* off Cheapside for something over two years; her circumstances had not changed during that time; she herself had scarcely changed; her features had, perhaps, developed a little and become more defined, her manner less hesitating—and that was all. That was all, at least, that was noticeable. A great change, however, had occurred in her between then and now that was not noticeable; that silent, miraculous change, so imperceptible, so profound, which works in a woman between the ages of eighteen and twenty.

She had come during those two years to have an exaggerated, almost a morbid idea of her own want of good looks; she had observed that regular frequenters of the *café*—young city-clerks, journalists and the rest—avoided the series of marble-topped tables at which she served for those which were attended by other girls smarter and prettier; she rarely received the little attentions which the other girls among themselves proclaimed. It was the stray customer, the bird of passage, who kept her busy. But, as a matter of fact, it was not her want of good looks that kept the younger men aloof; it was something in her manner, an absence, perhaps, of that fictitious spirit of gaiety, of that alert responsiveness, which men find so arresting in women. Really, she was not at all bad-looking.

Still, this neglect ate into her heart a little. She regretted her want of adaptability, of the faculty of being able to assume all those charming (as they seemed to her) little airs and graces, partly natural, partly cultivated, which so became the other girls; she, it is true, rather despised these coquetries of her companions, but her own deficiencies of the sort made her feel at times particularly dull and stupid and angry with herself. One or two of the girls at the *café* had, during her time, married one or two of the

young men who came there, and would afterwards pay an occasional visit to the place, certainly in pretty frocks, and, to all appearance, radiant and happy. But these girls were fortunate. Others, again, had suddenly disappeared, and none knew whither; but as their disappearance happened to be simultaneous with a break in the regular attendance of certain customers, dark stories were whispered to which the non-appearance of the missing ones seemed to lend colour.

After a while, Ellen did not mind so much being neglected; the smart of the sting became less and less painful, till finally, she rather, if anything, preferred escaping the attentions which fell to the share of the other girls. This may have been partly owing to the view which she came to take of men; her position had provided her with opportunities for arriving at a generalisation, and she came to think of men as either silly or wicked—silly, when they were attracted by the trivial insincerities of the girls in the *café*; wicked, when they took advantage of their rarer simplicity. She did not conceive, now, that she would ever fall in love, that anyone would ever fall in love with her.

All the same, as the two years advanced, Ellen began to feel a curious isolation of the heart, an emptiness which she never attributed to the absence of a lover. Besides, she had an intuitive suspicion that she possessed qualities which would be fatal to her retaining the affections of a husband, that there would be little joy for her in the companionship which would place her in the position of a wife. Not that she thought anything very clearly about these things; the vague emotions and sensations which moved her, the detached things which floated in her mind had not yet found the relief which comes with realisation; her impulses were not remotely guided by self-consciousness. A sense of loneliness oppressed her, which was not diminished by the companionship of her fellow servants at the *café*, and she wanted companionship of some sort. It was dreadful for her at times to feel so much alone, to feel that there was nothing in the world, in this great London, which she really cared for; that there was no one, since the death of her father and mother, who really cared for her.

She had this sense of loneliness even in the busiest time of the day, when an enormous wave of traffic swept by outside the *café*, and, inside, all was stir and movement. Even amid all this stir and din, when she was occupied in flitting from one table to another, in taking orders and attending to them, even at such moments her thoughts would be playing to another tune, her soul would be filled with unrest and impatience. Life, indeed, became a great struggle for her. Sometimes she said to herself that she would run away—from she knew not what, where she knew not to; and sometimes she wished very sincerely that she were dead.

. . . . She had seen many strange faces during those two years; at last it began to dawn upon her that one of these faces which had been strange was becoming familiar: a face with a fair, pointed beard and blue eyes. Beyond, however, merely ordering what he wanted, he had not spoken to her; it was improbable that he had noticed her; but his regular attendance at the tables at which she served began to attract the attention of the other girls, who derived some entertainment from hinting to Ellen that she was carrying on a flirtation, a suggestion which happened to be sufficiently inappropriate to appeal to their sense of humour. It was in keeping with Ellen's temperament that no romantic ideas entered her head at this point, where, possibly, the least susceptible of her companions would—as women will—have woven a complete fabric of foolish sentiment. Still, as he continued to come regularly, she began involuntarily to feel a certain liking for him; the fact of his never attempting to enter into any sort of conversation with her had its not unpleasant side for her. So, by-and-by, they both seemed to begin to know each other in this silent way. And yet there came moments when Ellen felt somehow that she would like to talk to him, like to tell him all about herself, and what she felt. His presence accentuated a dimly-realised need for self-expression, of pouring into some ear the flood of vague sentiments which possessed her. She could not talk to the other girls; they would not understand, or they would laugh at her; but she could, she felt, talk to this fair-bearded man with the blue eyes. But not at the *café*; she would rather remain silent for ever than do that. Then, how?

This idea of speaking to him, of sharing with him her whole confidence, seized upon her, and developed with an intensity which caused her ceaseless perturbation and pain.

After a little time, indeed, they drifted, naturally enough, into a conventional intercourse, almost monosyllabic, uninteresting, which seemed to her hopelessly trivial—but how to advance beyond it! Once or twice she thought she observed a look of interrogation in the blue eyes, a look which invited her confidence, and, at the same time, occasioned her a poignant feeling of self-consciousness—there, at the *café*, while meeting the significant glances, the partly ironical, partly suggestive, glances of her companions. No! she could not speak to him there; she had nothing to say to him there. Yet it was hard to resist the appeal of his eyes.

“You are looking pale. Do you go out much?” he said to her one day.

“No; only home and back.”

“Ah! you should.”

“We don’t close till seven,” she said. Then, their eyes meeting, she continued irresistibly: “Will you meet me to-night?”

It was not till an hour or so later that she realised that she was to meet him that evening at the principal entrance to St. Paul’s; that she realised that she herself had made the appointment. She had leapt the barrier, and was shocked at the extent of her daring, a little humiliated even; yet, above everything, singularly elated and careless. She had never breathed so freely.

But when they met, the need for self-expression was no longer apparent; she only felt stupid and shy. He suggested that they should go to a theatre or to an exhibition at Earl’s Court, but she would not go to either place. Then they walked along the Embankment, between Blackfriars’ Bridge and Charing Cross. He talked a good deal, but she hardly caught or understood what he said, and was quietly irresponsive. There was in his manner an air of familiarity which slightly repelled her; she began to wish that she had not, after all, asked him to meet her; to think of abruptly leaving him. Once he put his arm through hers, and was surprised at the startled expression

which sprang to her face as she quickly drew apart from him. After this his manner changed, and she felt more at ease. The incident had defined her attitude.

Reaching the gardens on the Embankment, near Charing Cross, they entered a gate and sat on one of the seats. There were some children playing about on the path whose antics amused her, and led her to talk about her own childhood, to tell him of those dear, half-forgotten things which everyone remembers so well, of that dim world of curious fancies which all of us at one time inhabited. He was sympathetic, and they talked on so in the fading light until it was time for the gates of the garden to be closed. As they passed through them, their intimacy had become as natural and easy as she could have dared to hope.

They crossed the Strand and penetrated the maze of streets which lead in the direction of King's Cross, where she had her lodging. And now all the things that had lain in her mind, all the incoherent emotions that had possessed her, became coherent and simple, derived shape and form in the attempt to express them. She told him all about her present life, about the other girls in the *café* and their sentimental episodes. She told him of the feeling of loneliness, of abstraction, of the vague itching at her heart which never ceased.

At last they reached a house in one of the outlying streets of Regent Square.

"I don't know why I asked you to meet me to-night," she said, stopping at the door of this house; "I don't know what is the matter with me. But I wanted to speak to someone. And I couldn't speak to the other girls; they would only have made fun of me, I think. I feel happier now that I have had a nice long talk with someone—still—there is something—something—" She paused a moment, and then proceeded, rather abruptly: "I don't want to be married, the same as most girls do; I don't like men, as a rule—at least, not in that way . . . besides, I think I should always be happier remaining as I am at present, working for myself, independent."

She gave a little shriek of delight at a thought which suddenly occurred to her, a flash of mental illumination, which enabled her to divine the source of all her perplexities, which instantly enabled her to solve the problem of her happiness; a thought which filled her poor, empty heart. "I think," she said, softly, "if I had a baby, my very own, I should want nothing—nothing in this world more than that!" Her lips quivered and tears came into her eyes, exquisitely tender tears.

She then turned to the door and opened it with a latch-key.

"Are you living alone?" he asked.

"Yes, quite alone," she said, retreating into the passage without turning.

He followed her a couple of paces, and then stood with one foot on the doorstep. He looked into the passage, but could not make out whether she were standing there in the dark or not. He wondered if she were standing there. Then taking the handle of the door he drew it gently to, and went down the street.

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