

OF A LADY IN HEAVEN

I HAD never before fallen so easily and pleasantly into conversation with anyone; it was as though we had for many years enjoyed an unexacting friendship. For though I was fully aware that she was a stranger to me, there seemed to be between us no barriers of the mind; and this, despite the fact that I was suddenly in a place that I did not know, without even the vaguest memory to tell me how I had come there. I remember marvelling at the beauty of the scene, and wondering if its mild and charming aspect had cast a spell upon me. For we were quite at ease. We stood on a broad stone terrace, balustraded and open to the sky, stretching back to the gardens and pavilions of a palace. Beneath our feet, below steep, flower-covered slopes and rolling fields, the whole world seemed to lie within the possibilities of vision; and now the plains, now the far-distant mountains, now the dark stretches of the forest revealed themselves beneath a tender floating haze that was as fresh as morning, yet as restful and contented as the twilight.

She stood looking down over the fields, leaning a little forward, one finely-shaped hand resting lightly on the balustrade. Her graciousness was elusive, yet not remote, her friendliness apparent without effort. Perfectly attuned to her surroundings, assured and happy and free from arrogance, she gave me sympathy and welcome without questioning, and I accepted it. Still unaware of what had happened to me, I stood on a garden terrace high above the world and talked of the places and the people that I loved with one who loved them too.

And gradually I realized that it was indeed the world that lay beneath us, remote from us, though how

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I had come to leave it I did not know. But I saw it now across a parapet in Heaven.

The cities of Europe came before my eyes, as I had longed to see them. I saw all that I would, yet remained with my new-found companion on the terrace; and she, following the trend of my thoughts, made pleasant comments, first on the aspect of one place and then another. Florence and Belgrade, Berlin and Moscow were alike familiar to her and understood. The Scottish moors, the towering Alps, the wide deserts passed before us; she did not speak of them as a traveller might, nor merely as a reader like myself; she was a neighbour to each one in turn, and realized their ways, their past, and their aspirations.

Such talk led us naturally to personalities, and so she spoke of people that she knew. I knew them, too, but only through my books. They had been real enough to me before, these poets and heroes, but she brought them before me vividly. They had been my saints, 'beckoning from the abode, where the eternal are.' But to her they were friends. Keats she could not praise too highly: I listened entranced to her description of him; the loveliness of his verse was in her very speech. We talked a little of Shelley, a little of Dante, a little of Caesar and of Charlemagne. For all these names were of great interest to me, and she was able to satisfy me with regard to them. She was at home in all centuries and all countries, but it was evident that her preference was with the Londoner. I had not speculated as to what had been her worldly environment and time. But I began to perceive, as we talked on, that the sweetness with which she rendered the London speech of Keats, the sympathy with which she returned again and again to his name, were due to a closer kinship than I had understood at first.

Yet she was most animated when we spoke of Shakespeare; she was as warm in praise of him, though

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with more laughter. She went so far as to remark, as she had not remarked of Keats, that '*he* was one of ourselves.' Some deeper and more personal feeling began to stir her now, and I was not a part of it. She looked out into the world, and stretched out her hand as though she too would 'call spirits from the vasty deep.' As if in answer to her gesture, London became visible to us, rising out of the mists, but though I recognized it, it was not a London that I had seen before except in reconstructive fancy. It was a Tudor city of Gothic steeples and timbered and gabled houses overhanging narrow streets, under the ungainly shadow of old St. Paul's.

'That is Shakespeare's London,' she said. 'And mine,' I assured her, as with a student's eagerness I scanned the crowded streets and the busy river. But she laughed very low, as at some happy memory. 'And mine,' she said in turn.

And as she spoke, under my watching eyes the City changed. It overflowed its boundaries. The streets and the houses shifted and were replaced by others, the old Cathedral melted and gave way to Wren's St. Paul's. It was the London that I knew. I seemed to see it very closely, as though my thoughts and memories carried me from street to street, and yet it was small and far away. And as I watched, one corner became vivid, and one figure detached itself from the home-going evening crowds that poured along Cheapside—a little shabby, shapeless woman who trudged patiently on ill-shod feet against the stream, an office-cleaner on her way to her evening rounds.

Even at that distance and in that guise, I recognized her. Astonished, I turned back to my companion, half expecting to find that she had left me. But she was beside me still, though indefinably she had changed. Her graciousness had not departed, but I saw now that it clothed a sturdy strength and patience. She lifted her

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hands slightly, as though in a gesture of gratitude and giving to someone unseen; and after all they were not white and smooth and shapely, but knotted and broken and rough. Yet in that transforming air they were no less beautiful.

‘The dull grey skies were always wonderful to me,’ she said. ‘I loved the heavy evenings. The noisiest traffic could not drown the voices of the pigeons then. And if the sunlight was pale, it was the more tender for that—if it was rare, more welcome. There is no city in the world where the sun is so welcome as in London.’ She paused a little, and then went on: ‘It is not taken from me—the drudgery, the dinginess, the missed joys’—and in a lower tone, ‘the dear and familiar things, the happiness, the willingness of tired hands and feet.’

‘Even here, in this sweet air, with Shakespeare, and with Keats and Dante!’ I marvelled.

‘Even here,’ she assented gravely, ‘with Shakespeare and with Keats, whom in my London I never knew—and with Zita, and little Theresa, and Simon of Cyrene’

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