

CHAPTER VI. TALK

The party stayed to the end of the interminable opera. They had agreed to wait for Aaron. He was to come around to the vestibule for them, after the show. They trooped slowly down-stairs into the crush of the entrance hall. Chattering, swirling people, red carpet, palms green against cream-and-gilt walls, small whirlpools of life at the open, dark doorways, men in opera hats steering decisively about-it was the old scene. But there were no taxis--absolutely no taxis. And it was raining. Fortunately the women had brought shoes. They slipped these on. Jim rocked through the crowd, in his tall hat, looking for the flautist.

At last Aaron was found--wearing a bowler hat. Julia groaned in spirit. Josephine's brow knitted. Not that anybody cared, really. But as one must frown at something, why not at the bowler hat? Acquaintances and elegant young men in uniforms insisted on rushing up and bowing and exchanging a few words, either with Josephine, or Jim, or Julia, or Lilly. They were coldly received. The party veered out into the night.

The women hugged their wraps about them, and set off sharply, feeling some repugnance for the wet pavements and the crowd. They had not far to go--only to Jim's rooms in Adelphi. Jim was leading Aaron, holding him by the arm and slightly pinching his muscles. It gave him great satisfaction to have between his fingers the arm-muscles of a working-man, one of the common people, the fons et origo of modern

life. Jim was talking rather vaguely about Labour and Robert Smillie, and Bolshevism. He was all for revolution and the triumph of labour.

So they arrived, mounted a dark stair, and entered a large, handsome room, one of the Adams rooms. Jim had furnished it from Heale's with striped hangings, green and white and yellow and dark purple, and with a green-and-black checked carpet, and great stripe-covered chairs and Chesterfield. A big gas-fire was soon glowing in the handsome old fire-place, the panelled room seemed cosy.

While Jim was handing round drinks and sandwiches, and Josephine was making tea, Robert played Bach on the piano--the pianola, rather. The chairs and lounge were in a half-circle round the fire. The party threw off their wraps and sank deep into this expensive comfort of modern bohemia. They needed the Bach to take away the bad taste that Aida had left in their mouths. They needed the whiskey and curacao to rouse their spirits. They needed the profound comfort in which to sink away from the world. All the men, except Aaron, had been through the war in some way or other. But here they were, in the old setting exactly, the old bohemian routine.

The bell rang, Jim went downstairs. He returned shortly with a frail, elegant woman--fashionable rather than bohemian. She was cream and auburn, Irish, with a slightly-lifted upper lip that gave her a pathetic look. She dropped her wrap and sat down by Julia, taking her hand delicately.

"How are you, darling?" she asked.

"Yes--I'm happy," said Julia, giving her odd, screwed-up smile.

The pianola stopped, they all chatted indiscriminately. Jim was watching the new-comer--Mrs. Browning--with a concentrated wolfish grin.

"I like her," he said at last. "I've seen her before, haven't I?--I like her awfully."

"Yes," said Josephine, with a slight grunt of a laugh. "He wants to be loved."

"Oh," cried Clariss. "So do I!"

"Then there you are!" cried Tanny.

"Alas, no, there we aren't," cried Clariss. She was beautiful too, with her lifted upper-lip. "We both want to be loved, and so we miss each other entirely. We run on in two parallel lines, that can never meet." She laughed low and half sad.

"Doesn't SHE love you?" said Aaron to Jim amused, indicating Josephine.

"I thought you were engaged."

"HER!" leered Jim vindictively, glancing at Josephine. "She doesn't love me."

"Is that true?" asked Robert hastily, of Josephine.

"Why," she said, "yes. Why should he make me say out here that I don't love him!"

"Got you my girl," said Jim.

"Then it's no engagement?" said Robert.

"Listen to the row fools make, rushing in," said Jim maliciously.

"No, the engagement is broken," said Josephine.

"World coming to pieces bit by bit," said Lilly. Jim was twisting in his chair, and looking like a Chinese dragon, diabolical. The room was uneasy.

"What gives you such a belly-ache for love, Jim?" said Lilly, "or for being loved? Why do you want so badly to be loved?"

"Because I like it, damn you," barked Jim. "Because I'm in need of it."

None of them quite knew whether they ought to take it as a joke. It was

just a bit too real to be quite pleasant.

"Why are you such a baby?" said Lilly. "There you are, six foot in length, have been a cavalry officer and fought in two wars, and you spend your time crying for somebody to love you. You're a comic."

"Am I though?" said Jim. "I'm losing life. I'm getting thin."

"You don't look as if you were losing life," said Lilly.

"Don't I? I am, though. I'm dying."

"What of? Lack of life?"

"That's about it, my young cock. Life's leaving me."

"Better sing Tosti's Farewell to it."

Jim who had been sprawling full length in his arm-chair, the centre of interest of all the company, suddenly sprang forward and pushed his face, grinning, in the face of Lilly.

"You're a funny customer, you are," he said.

Then he turned round in his chair, and saw Clariss sitting at the feet of Julia, with one white arm over her friend's knee. Jim immediately

stuck forward his muzzle and gazed at her. Clariss had loosened her masses of thick, auburn hair, so that it hung half free. Her face was creamy pale, her upper lip lifted with odd pathos! She had rose-rubies in her ears.

"I like HER," said Jim. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Browning. Don't be so rude," said Josephine.

"Browning for gravies. Any relation of Robert?"

"Oh, yes! You ask my husband," came the slow, plangent voice of Clariss.

"You've got a husband, have you?"

"Rather! Haven't I, Juley?"

"Yes," said Julia, vaguely and wispily. "Yes, dear, you have."

"And two fine children," put in Robert.

"No! You don't mean it!" said Jim. "Who's your husband? Anybody?"

"Rather!" came the deep voice of Clariss. "He sees to that."

Jim stared, grinning, showing his pointed teeth, reaching nearer and

nearer to Clariss who, in her frail scrap of an evening dress, amethyst and silver, was sitting still in the deep black hearth-rug, her arm over Julia's knee, taking very little notice of Jim, although he amused her.

"I like you awfully, I say," he repeated.

"Thanks, I'm sure," she said.

The others were laughing, sprawling in their chairs, and sipping curacao and taking a sandwich or a cigarette. Aaron Sisson alone sat upright, smiling flickeringly. Josephine watched him, and her pointed tongue went from time to time over her lips.

"But I'm sure," she broke in, "this isn't very interesting for the others. Awfully boring! Don't be silly all the time, Jim, or we must go home."

Jim looked at her with narrowed eyes. He hated her voice. She let her eye rest on his for a moment. Then she put her cigarette to her lips. Robert was watching them both.

Josephine took her cigarette from her lips again.

"Tell us about yourself, Mr. Sisson," she said. "How do you like being in London?"

"I like London," said Aaron.

Where did he live? Bloomsbury. Did he know many people? No--nobody except a man in the orchestra. How had he got his job? Through an agent. Etc. Etc.

"What do you make of the miners?" said Jim, suddenly taking a new line.

"Me?" said Sisson. "I don't make anything of them."

"Do you think they'll make a stand against the government?"

"What for?"

"Nationalisation."

"They might, one day."

"Think they'd fight?"

"Fight?"

"Yes."

Aaron sat laughing.

"What have they to fight for?"

"Why, everything! What haven't they to fight for?" cried Josephine fiercely. "Freedom, liberty, and escape from this vile system. Won't they fight for that?"

Aaron sat smiling, slowly shaking his head.

"Nay," he said, "you mustn't ask me what they'll do--I've only just left them, for good. They'll do a lot of cavilling."

"But won't they ACT?" cried Josephine.

"Act?" said Aaron. "How, act?"

"Why, defy the government, and take things in their own hands," said Josephine.

"They might, some time," said Aaron, rather indifferent.

"I wish they would!" cried Josephine. "My, wouldn't I love it if they'd make a bloody revolution!"

They were all looking now at her. Her black brows were twitching, in her black and silver dress she looked like a symbol of young disaster.

"Must it be bloody, Josephine?" said Robert.

"Why, yes. I don't believe in revolutions that aren't bloody," said Josephine. "Wouldn't I love it! I'd go in front with a red flag."

"It would be rather fun," said Tanny.

"Wouldn't it!" cried Josephine.

"Oh, Josey, dear!" cried Julia hysterically. "Isn't she a red-hot Bolsher! I should be frightened."

"No!" cried Josephine. "I should love it."

"So should I," said Jim, in a luscious sort of voice. "What price machine-guns at the end of the Strand! That's a day to live for, what?"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Clariss, with her deep laugh. "We'd all Bolsh together. I'd give the cheers."

"I wouldn't mind getting killed. I'd love it, in a real fight," said Josephine.

"But, Josephine," said Robert, "don't you think we've had enough of that sort of thing in the war? Don't you think it all works out rather stupid and unsatisfying?"

"Ah, but a civil war would be different. I've no interest in fighting Germans. But a civil war would be different."

"That's a fact, it would," said Jim.

"Only rather worse," said Robert.

"No, I don't agree," cried Josephine. "You'd feel you were doing something, in a civil war."

"Pulling the house down," said Lilly.

"Yes," she cried. "Don't you hate it, the house we live in--London--England--America! Don't you hate them?"

"I don't like them. But I can't get much fire in my hatred. They pall on me rather," said Lilly.

"Ay!" said Aaron, suddenly stirring in his chair.

Lilly and he glanced at one another with a look of recognition.

"Still," said Tanny, "there's got to be a clearance some day or other."

"Oh," drawled Clariss. "I'm all for a clearance. I'm all for pulling the

house down. Only while it stands I do want central heating and a good cook."

"May I come to dinner?" said Jim.

"Oh, yes. You'd find it rather domestic."

"Where do you live?"

"Rather far out now--Amersham."

"Amersham? Where's that--?"

"Oh, it's on the map."

There was a little lull. Jim gulped down a drink, standing at the sideboard. He was a tall, fine, soldierly figure, and his face, with its little sandy moustache and bald forehead, was odd. Aaron Sisson sat watching him, unconsciously.

"Hello you!" said Jim. "Have one?"

Aaron shook his head, and Jim did not press him. It saved the drinks.

"You believe in love, don't you?" said Jim, sitting down near Aaron, and grinning at him.

"Love!" said Aaron.

"LOVE! he says," mocked Jim, grinning at the company.

"What about it, then?" asked Aaron.

"It's life! Love is life," said Jim fiercely.

"It's a vice, like drink," said Lilly.

"Eh? A vice!" said Jim. "May be for you, old bird."

"More so still for you," said Lilly.

"It's life. It's life!" reiterated Jim. "Don't you agree?" He turned wolfishly to Clariss.

"Oh, yes--every time--" she drawled, nonchalant.

"Here, let's write it down," said Lilly. He found a blue pencil and printed in large letters on the old creamy marble of the mantel-piece panel:--LOVE IS LIFE.

Julia suddenly rose and flung her arms asunder wildly.

"Oh, I hate love. I hate it," she protested.

Jim watched her sardonically.

"Look at her!" he said. "Look at Lesbia who hates love."

"No, but perhaps it is a disease. Perhaps we are all wrong, and we can't love properly," put in Josephine.

"Have another try," said Jim,--"I know what love is. I've thought about it. Love is the soul's respiration."

"Let's have that down," said Lilly.

LOVE IS THE SOUL'S RESPIRATION. He printed it on the old mantel-piece.

Jim eyed the letters.

"It's right," he said. "Quite right. When you love, your soul breathes in. If you don't breathe in, you suffocate."

"What about breathing out?" said Robert. "If you don't breathe out, you asphyxiate."

"Right you are, Mock Turtle--" said Jim maliciously.

"Breathing out is a bloody revolution," said Lilly.

"You've hit the nail on the head," said Jim solemnly.

"Let's record it then," said Lilly. And with the blue pencil he printed:

WHEN YOU LOVE, YOUR SOUL BREATHES IN--

WHEN YOUR SOUL BREATHES OUT, IT'S A BLOODY REVOLUTION.

"I say Jim," he said. "You must be busting yourself, trying to breathe in."

"Don't you be too clever. I've thought about it," said Jim. "When I'm in love, I get a great inrush of energy. I actually feel it rush in--here!"

He poked his finger on the pit of his stomach. "It's the soul's expansion. And if I can't get these rushes of energy, I'M DYING, AND I KNOW I AM."

He spoke the last words with sudden ferocity and desperation.

"All I know is," said Tanny, "you don't look it."

"I AM. I am." Jim protested. "I'm dying. Life's leaving me."

"Maybe you're choking with love," said Robert. "Perhaps you have

breathed in so much, you don't know how to let it go again. Perhaps your soul's got a crick in it, with expanding so much."

"You're a bloody young sucking pig, you are," said Jim.

"Even at that age, I've learned my manners," replied Robert.

Jim looked round the party. Then he turned to Aaron Sisson.

"What do you make of 'em, eh?" he said.

Aaron shook his head, and laughed.

"Me?" he said.

But Jim did not wait for an answer.

"I've had enough," said Tanny suddenly rising. "I think you're all silly. Besides, it's getting late."

"She!" said Jim, rising and pointing luridly to Clariss. "She's Love. And HE's the Working People. The hope is these two--" He jerked a thumb at Aaron Sisson, after having indicated Mrs. Browning.

"Oh, how awfully interesting. It's quite a long time since I've been a personification.--I suppose you've never been one before?" said Clariss,

turning to Aaron in conclusion.

"No, I don't think I have," he answered.

"I hope personification is right.--Ought to be allegory or something else?" This from Clariss to Robert.

"Or a parable, Clariss," laughed the young lieutenant.

"Goodbye," said Tanny. "I've been awfully bored."

"Have you?" grinned Jim. "Goodbye! Better luck next time."

"We'd better look sharp," said Robert, "if we want to get the tube."

The party hurried through the rainy narrow streets down to the Embankment station. Robert and Julia and Clariss were going west, Lilly and his wife were going to Hampstead, Josephine and Aaron Sisson were going both to Bloomsbury.

"I suppose," said Robert, on the stairs--"Mr. Sisson will see you to your door, Josephine. He lives your way."

"There's no need at all," said Josephine.

The four who were going north went down to the low tube level. It

was nearly the last train. The station was half deserted, half rowdy, several fellows were drunk, shouting and crowing. Down there in the bowels of London, after midnight, everything seemed horrible and unnatural.

"How I hate this London," said Tanny. She was half Norwegian, and had spent a large part of her life in Norway, before she married Lilly.

"Yes, so do I," said Josephine. "But if one must earn one's living one must stay here. I wish I could get back to Paris. But there's nothing doing for me in France.--When do you go back into the country, both of you?"

"Friday," said Lilly.

"How lovely for you!--And when will you go to Norway, Tanny?"

"In about a month," said Tanny.

"You must be awfully pleased."

"Oh--thankful--THANKFUL to get out of England--"

"I know. That's how I feel. Everything is so awful--so dismal and dreary, I find it--"

They crowded into the train. Men were still yelling like wild beasts--others were asleep--soldiers were singing.

"Have you really broken your engagement with Jim?" shrilled Tanny in a high voice, as the train roared.

"Yes, he's impossible," said Josephine. "Perfectly hysterical and impossible."

"And SELFISH--" cried Tanny.

"Oh terribly--" cried Josephine.

"Come up to Hampstead to lunch with us," said Lilly to Aaron.

"Ay--thank you," said Aaron.

Lilly scribbled directions on a card. The hot, jaded midnight underground rattled on. Aaron and Josephine got down to change trains.