

Knickerbocker Glories and Blood

It was Hetty's birthday in May. She was eleven. Teddy took her and all her sisters for knickerbocker glories at the ice-cream parlour on the high street in honour of the occasion.

'Why haven't you been arrested yet?' said Kezia, to Evelyn. This, to Kezia, was the whole point of being a Suffragette. What better way to annoy Father and Mother than being thrown into a prison cell? Ideally one with rats and straw and chains. Kezia had a decidedly medieval view of the justice system.

'They don't seem to be very arrest-y sort of Suffragettes in Hampstead,' said Evelyn. She scooped her ice cream out of the bottom of the glass, and frowned at it. She wasn't *entirely* sure what she thought about being arrested. The Suffragettes had a policy of refusing to eat in prison, to protest the government's refusal to treat them as political prisoners. The government had decided to force them to eat anyway. Evelyn had read an account of a hunger strike and force-feeding in *Votes for Women*, and it had sounded deeply unpleasant. The woman had been strapped to a chair, kicking and fighting,

while the feeding-tube was rammed down her throat. Later, alone in the cell, she had forced herself to vomit up the food again. Somewhere in this process, her eyes had turned completely bloodshot – a surprisingly disturbing detail. Force-feeding wasn't supposed to happen any more, but it still did sometimes, Evelyn knew. Either way, getting arrested seemed rather extreme.

'I already told you,' said Teddy cheerfully. 'If you want to annoy your father, we could just elope. Much less hassle, and rather more fun, don't you think? A small castle of our own in Gretna Green – a herd of highland cows in patriotic ribbons – bagpipes at the reception would be rather jolly, wouldn't they?'

'Ass,' said Evelyn. She wasn't entirely sure what she thought about Teddy, either. Of course, she couldn't imagine marrying anyone *else*. But wasn't love supposed to feel like a hurricane?

Teddy didn't feel like a hurricane. Teddy felt like home.

She didn't say any of this, of course. Instead, she said, 'Father would never let you get away with it. He'd come and fight a duel for my honour atween the clumps o' purple heather. And then you'd shoot him – the young swain always does – and leave me pale and sorrowing on his bloodstained breast. Which might make family occasions rather awkward.'

'Steady on,' said Teddy. 'You might get lucky. He might shoot me!'

Evelyn licked the last drop of ice cream from the pointed tip of her spoon.

'Or,' she said, 'we could do this instead.'

She opened her copy of *Votes for Women* and showed him

the page. It was an advertisement for an action a few weeks away. The king would be in procession down Pall Mall, and the assembled Suffragettes would try and pass a message to him. Hetty and Kezia scrambled to see.

‘It’s a march!’ said Hetty. ‘A proper march! Do you think there’ll be girls with flowers – and trumpets – and singing . . .?’

‘No,’ said Teddy gravely. He took the newspaper from Evelyn and frowned at it. ‘I think there’ll be violence, and arrests. Your women have a rotten time on these things, Evelyn. I’m dashed sure I wouldn’t want to go.’ He was looking at her intently. She scowled. Being told what to do always made Evelyn pig-headed. ‘You aren’t really going to do this, are you? It’s bound to be frightfully dangerous.’

Evelyn took the paper back from him.

‘I jolly well am,’ she said. She saw his expression, and something in it made her falter. She pushed on regardless. ‘And if you don’t like it, you can just come with me, that’s all.’

He didn’t reply, but she could see how troubled he was. He said no more, however, until the ice creams were finished and the four of them were up on the Heath. Hetty had new birthday roller-skates to play with, and even Kezia was not too old to resist the lure of a clear path and a newly oiled set of skates. Teddy and Evelyn wandered behind them. He took her arm and tucked it into his and said, ‘Don’t you think you ought to chuck this in now?’

She didn’t answer. Teddy said gently, ‘Evelyn . . . how much does it matter, the vote? You *can’t* think it’s worth the things these women do. Setting off bombs, arson attacks . . . Marches are one thing – I don’t say I’m against marches – but rallies

like this one . . . they're dangerous, Evelyn. I've been reading those papers too; people get hurt at those things. They get arrested, and then it's all hunger strikes and force-feeding and whatever else that dreadful man Asquith dreams up. Is a vote worth dying for? Is it worth *killing* for?

'Now you are being absurd,' Evelyn said. 'Suffragettes don't kill people. You know they don't. Damage to property only.'

'Oh, don't they, though?' said Teddy. 'What about that business in Ireland, then?' And, seeing her uncomprehending face, 'You *must* have heard about that, Evelyn.'

Evelyn glared. The world, as far as she could tell, was full of things she *must* have heard of. None of the Collis girls read newspapers, as Teddy knew perfectly well. There was only one newspaper in their house – it arrived in the morning, was read by Evelyn's father over breakfast, put into his pocket, and taken off on the omnibus, from whence it was never seen again. The only news Evelyn knew about was the sort everyone talked about, like the sinking of the *Titanic*.

Teddy explained. In 1912, four Suffragettes had tried to set fire to a packed Theatre Royal in Dublin, where the prime minister, Mr Asquith, was due to speak on Home Rule. One of the women had tried to set the reels of film in the cinematograph box alight. The fire had quickly been extinguished, but had it not been, the consequences could have been disastrous.

'And there's that woman at the Derby last year,' Teddy went on. 'The one who was queer in the head.' Evelyn did know about her. Emily Wilding Davison. She'd thrown herself in front of the king's horse and killed herself.

'She wasn't queer in the head,' she said. 'She was a martyr

for freedom. A *soldier*. If a soldier did something like that, you'd say he was a hero.'

Teddy sighed.

'I know you want to go to Oxford,' he said. 'I can't for the life of me see why, but I can see it must be perfectly beastly to have everyone tell you you can't. But how is it going to change anything, joining these women?'

Evelyn scowled. She didn't know the answer to his question, exactly. Only that she was fed up of taking things without a fight.

She said this to Teddy, who laughed.

'When did you ever take anything without a fight?'

'I mean it!' Evelyn said furiously.

'So do I,' said Teddy. He watched her fondly. 'See here,' he said, 'you *don't* believe all that bosh the Suffragettes talk, do you? You *can't* think Parliament's going to start handing out old-age pensions, and free orphanages, and equal pay and whatever else, do you, just because women have a vote? I mean, it all sounds jolly nice. But you know it's a pipe dream.' He paused. 'Don't you?'

'No,' she said. 'No, I don't. And even if it is a pipe dream . . . Teddy, I don't care. I can't know that something is possible, and sit back and not do anything to make it real.'