

LONDON

"The Woman's Salon," November.—A blind street, lined with tenements, begins opposite my window. Underneath, in this street, huge drays and carts crunch along all day. A saloon is on the corner of the blind street. Next door is a leather warehouse, where rolls of rank smelling skins are being hauled in and out from morning till night.

My office is whitewashed, powdered to grey with dust. The whole front is taken up by the immense window with a glassy crumpled yellow blind. There is a large roll-top desk for me and green shaded electric bulbs. I should say the desk was man's size; certainly the whole place was not built for a woman.

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The stairs are long, wooden, dusty, uneven; it is almost impossible to get a cab here when you stumble your way out at five o'clock in the evening. From ten in the morning till five in the evening, two sulphur yellow dips into the clamour of the underground railway, two disgusted dirty walks down warehoused, barricaded streets, trams, trucks, drays, an ooze of work-girls and labourers, solemn ragged children, and a green, slime-covered, stone-slabbed church-yard.

I get my lips between my teeth, and face it each morning. I am white with dismay at it when I reach my desk and find a pile of proofs waiting for me, a bundle of copy from the advertising manager to be given with directions to the head compositor.

The compositor comes down in answer to my telephone—an abhorrent creature,

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so weirdly marked with small-pox that you wonder why he wants to obtrude that painfully mutilated body on the world. He stands at my chair while I give my directions. He feels my shrinking, and takes a diabolical pleasure in coming as often to the office as he can. Then I dictate some letters to my stenographer—a typical lower middle-class English girl, with a thick coil of hair dressed low, and a string of tiny false pearls around the neck of her collarless blouse. Then I leave the room, ostensibly to wash my hands, in reality to crouch down in the grinding horror of the toilet-room in front of the cracked looking-glass and broken cup on the shelf, and ask myself how long I can stand this, and why, in the name of common sense, I am standing it at all.

There is a ceaseless oozing of horror from the tenements of the opposite street. Men staggering up it, constantly yelling

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things; women, overflowing their clothes, with bloated faces, and striking at any children that belong to them. Suddenly there will be a rush of voices, a trampling of feet, and a man, with a blood-stained bandage around his head, will be half carried up the street, held on either side by a policeman and a woman. I opened my eyes too soon one day—the man had fallen on the steps. I had never seen a human being fall before. It clutched your heart with mysterious terror. Policemen, whose existence in the world had been before to me vaguely a matter of crowded street crossings, suddenly enlarged into a haven for my eyes when I walked through the streets. The stiff helmets, the blue uniform, the broad shoulders, represented actual personal safety to my scorched knowledge of life in other streets.

The very sound of the factory girls singing and laughing as they poured out

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of the buildings at the noon hour froze me with fear. They would walk four abreast, their arms linked, the limp feathers in their hats nodding over their broad, strong faces. I met them once suddenly face to face when by chance I was on the street and turned a corner. I shrank to one side. I seemed suddenly a thing they could break between their fingers. I was afraid of the heavy red hands that waved negligently as they walked in unison to their hoarse singing. My very clothes seemed grotesque. I felt myself a poster of some far-away play hung in a low street, and in a place to be spattered by the slimy mud of the traffic. These women, these people, were like spirits of a political revolution swarming out of their burrows, wallowing in their blood and dirt, and feasting on their yells and drunkenness. I seemed to hear the far-away drums of the women who marched to Versailles.

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The Park was empty when I came to it to-day, the wide fields were veiled in the ambiguous early twilight of the wet air. The trees were subdued, overweighted, the flowers pressed down into the water-soaked mould; but through it all, over it all, like the magnetism of life, drenched the penetrating sweetness of the earth smell, the London haze that clung to everything as the skies and the world met in the upright, fairy stream.

This was not the Park I had known; this was only a Park with memories, or a present of exquisite closed secrets.

Yet it was elemental; I recognised that; as elemental, as necessary, as the incident of birth, the ignorance of childhood: the rain could make me shudder even though I loved it. It paled my face when I realised that I could no longer return to childish things.

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I thought I might catch a half-hour at the pictures on this ghost-like afternoon, and was driven through the silent open mud, under the overhanging arches of St. James's Park—the Park of the magical waterways, of the silver swans, all drowning in saffron wet mist, past the Carlton, where I saw for a moment the fog curve to the form of purple orchids, to the stone lions of Trafalgar Square. I shut my eyes. I was near by, a little too brutally close, to something I did not want to see. I hurried up the steps of the National Gallery, but I was ashamed of my fear and turned to face it. Down over Whitehall to Parliament Square: the towers of St. Stephen's fluted through the mist. Again it was a picture—an engraving made on metal by fire, only the luminous softness of tempered light, nothing more. I thought it beautiful, as I would think any other pillared tower beautiful that was

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clasped and wreathed by the changing foam of the hazy waves of rain. We looked at each other, and the quiet of the stones was not quieter than my heart.

The staircase opened out its curve before me; it implied a shelter as I went slowly up and caught the changing flames of the ether of new worlds in the planes of rose and purple and green. But they retreated, closed, dimmed, as we lose the reflection of the sky in still water, if we bend over to see more closely; and I panted to them hungrily, more hungrily for what I wanted to desire, than for what I really missed.

I reached the rooms of the Pre-Raphaelites. I had not before cared for them very much, but to-day the even rows of angels in the pallid air, the blond skies and pale earth, the unfaded ashen roses, the aureoles of gold made of the texture

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of extinct dreams, gathered me to their ethereal peace.

I had forgotten; but, even so, there had been nothing to remember. Yet one small black fact crept venomously to me out of the sequestered silence of that year. I must meet him again. No matter what he might ever say or do throughout my life, I must revenge that year, or forgive that year; and I do not come of a race that forgives, and I am not afraid of the bitter ecstasy of revenge. The mere fact of seeing unbars the door to that inner monster that claws at my will and demands to be satisfied with cruelty.

For everything I have done, all the pain endured, all the danger, was made possible by him. It was well enough for him to guard me; but did he think, if once started, how I would guard myself? He knew I was a woman who would make reality into some barbarous excess. No

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one else had the power to take me out of my dream world. He was the only human being to whom I would confess humanity. He is responsible for it all—everything, and everything I ever do.

I remember once—in the illness, when they touched me—I screamed with the pain. If I could see him bound, and hear him scream once—just once—I would be satisfied; just to see him look up as hurt people do, asking all that is pitiless for help, and to hear him scream once with the pain.

But I am not ready for moods like that. I have my life to make. I have the joy and the beauty of the world to fathom. I have no time—no time yet for those retrogressive satisfactions. I would rather gratify the desires of the woman of the twentieth century than pander to the passion of the creature of the stone age.

I am in London. I hear always the

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tempered sound, like the distant sound of a sea; but I might just as well be in the midst of a prairie for all the life of London, the real life, I can make mine—the real life, marble and orchids and men whose names are the sign-posts of history—the crossroads where nations pause uncertainly.

I must write to him soon, of course. It is August now; I can't put it off very much longer. He is in town only for five days more. It was in the *Morning Post* that he leaves for Homburg on the 5th.

Mysteriously, the hatefulness and strange horror of this life, the very obscure horror of the tenements, has become a black place where I have found I can hide myself. Once I let him know I am here, this must end. Then the old nerve-racking tug-of-war as to will and supremacy will begin. I know his influence over

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me. He would pour my life into a cup and drink it up.

I let him come here, to this sordid bleak place with the wooden staircase, the filthy tenements opposite, the muddy streets. It was after five; I sent the stenographer away early. I wanted to have time to carefully clamp my mind with being alone, first. The huge blind on the window was up, showing the moist grey air, and the occasional yellow, trembling street lights. I wanted nothing that suggested our being alone. The electric lamps in the office were spurting under their green shades, my roll-top desk was open and seethed with papers. Occasionally, when I could hear the rumble of something that was not the wheels of a truck, my blood would weigh in my eyelids till they fell over my eyes.

And then the wheels came that stopped.