Votes for Women

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PROLOGUE

Wednesday 4th June 1913

8 p.m.

Today, I have witnessed a most horrible, terrifying tragedy. It has changed my life. Cousin Freddie and I ...

No. I feel quite ill. I cannot write any more. My hand is shaking so much I cannot continue. I shall leave ink blots smudged with tears all over the page ...

Rose Brown put down her pen and threw herself on to her bed. Closing her eyes, she tried to put the sight she had seen out of her mind, but it was impossible. How could she ever forget what had happened at the Derby earlier that day?

CHAPTER 1

One year earlier: Friday 14th June 1912

"Look at this." Rose's big sister, Alice, strode into their bedroom and unrolled a large sheet of paper. She laid it flat on Rose's bed.

"What is it?" asked Rose.

"A poster. There's a march in London tomorrow," said Alice, a defiant smile on her face. "Look, it starts near Oxford Street and ends at the Royal Albert Hall. I'm going."

"Why?"

"Because I intend to be a Suffragette."

"Really?" Rose had heard of the Suffragettes. She knew they were campaigning so women would be allowed to vote. There were frequent reports in the newspapers of marches and meetings, even of some women breaking the law. "You will be careful, won't you, Alice?"

"Of course I will – only Mother and Father don't know about my plans yet. Promise me you won't say anything?"

Rose nodded, though she was not confident she should keep a secret that big from them.

“Mr Timmins has allowed me to take the day off from the haberdashery shop,” Alice explained.

“Will the shop manage without you?” Rose teased.

Alice laughed. “Well, the buttons and ribbons are sure to behave themselves in my absence, and the cotton reels won’t run away.”

Rose hugged her sister. Alice was 16, four years older than her. She seemed so grown up since she had left school, answered the advertisement for a haberdashery apprentice and subsequently begun working at the shop.

“You are going to tell Mother, aren’t you?” Rose asked.

“Of course,” Alice assured her. “But I don’t think she’ll want me to go.”

A few minutes later, they went downstairs. Mrs Brown was sitting in the living room, sewing.

“What are you making, Mother?” asked Rose.

“A little dress.” She held it up for Rose to see. “For that poor family I sometimes help. They don’t have enough money to feed themselves – let alone clothe five children, poor things – not since the husband died ... not on the wages the woman earns at the factory.”

“It’s a disgrace,” Alice declared angrily. “Women are treated so badly. If they had the vote, conditions would improve and women would be able to earn more. That’s why I’m going on the march in London tomorrow.”

“No, Alice!” Mrs Brown put down her sewing and frowned. “I forbid you to get mixed up with those people. They are troublemakers.”

“Troublemakers?” shouted Alice. “They’re striving for equality. Women have just as many rights as men.

We need the vote."

"But it never did me any harm not having the vote. I am quite happy as I am."

"Well, you should not be. You should be campaigning, too." Alice glared at her mother.

"Alice, I will not allow you to talk to me like this, especially in front of Rose. She is much too young to hear it."

Rose looked worriedly from one to the other. She did not like to hear her mother and sister quarrel.

"But ..." said Alice.

"But nothing. I have a good husband, a lovely home and three wonderful children. What more could I want?"

"Oh, I give up!" Alice turned and stormed from the room.

"Alice!" Mrs Brown stood up and began to follow her but, before she had gone very far, Rose heard the front door slam.

Saturday 15th June 1912

Alice went on the march today, despite Mother's protest. She crept out of our bedroom very early this morning and returned this evening. She looked rather dishevelled and fatigued although her eyes were shining. Father was extremely cross. He told her he believes that women should be ruled by the men in their lives. Alice almost exploded at that.

When we were alone, she told me how she had joined the crowd of marching women. She found herself walking next to a mill worker who introduced herself as Annie Kenney. I think Alice liked Annie because she talked about her a lot.

The most important woman on the march was, of course, Mrs Pankhurst. I have heard of her because there are frequent reports about her in the newspapers, too. Alice said Mrs Pankhurst made a 'very inspiring' speech. Her daughter, Christabel, was there, too, and another person called Emily Davison. They all belong to the Women's Social and Political Union, the WSPU for short.

I am not sure what I think. Alice is convinced these people are doing the right thing, but they are total strangers to me. On the other hand, I have known Mother all my life and I trust her opinion. I understand what she means when she states that she is quite contented with her life so why should she need to change things? Mother is not the only one who thinks that way. There are some women who are vehemently opposed to women having the vote. They say they do not want a 'petticoat government'. I think that means they do not want women to rule them. Well, I suspect that is a long way off!

It is all very confusing. I wonder what Granny thinks? I will ask her when she comes to visit in a few days' time.

As soon as Rose was awake the following morning, she rushed round to her cousin Freddie's house a few streets away.

"I need to talk," said Rose as he finished his breakfast.

"Let's go to the tree house," he said with a smile.

"But we're not children," said Rose. "I used to love playing up there when we were small, but now ..."

Freddie laughed. "It's so we can talk without being overheard."

They hurried to the garden and ran across the well-groomed lawn, past a bed of sweet-scented roses and climbed up into the big old chestnut tree. Rose found she hadn't forgotten the gnarled places which were essential as footholds and for grip. She squeezed in through the trapdoor entrance and was soon settled in the old wooden tree house. It seemed smaller now they were older, but they found enough space to sit down.

Immediately, Rose related Alice's adventure to him.

"Freddie, what do you think about women having the vote?" she asked when she had finished.

Freddie shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I do believe that women are equal to men."

"Do you really?" Rose was delighted. "From what Father said, I was under the impression that all males believed themselves superior to females."

"Not me!" he laughed. "You and I are equal, I would say. We're cousins and we're the same age; therefore, we must be."

"I hadn't thought of that," replied Rose. There really was a lot to discuss with Granny.

Granny's arrival put thoughts of Suffragettes out of Rose's mind for a while. Rose waited eagerly for her at the window. The first thing she spotted was Granny's white hair and smart hat over the front hedge, and she watched the tall, spritely old lady open the gate and begin striding up the path. Before Granny reached the front door, Rose hurried out to her and gave her a kiss.

Granny greeted Rose with a hug and a beaming smile before scurrying inside. Opening her large cloth bag, she gave Rose a lace collar, which she had made especially for her. After a cup of tea with Rose and her mother, and a chance to catch up on their news, Granny perched her spectacles on the end of her little nose and helped Rose sew the collar on to her best dress.

When Alice came home from the haberdasher's shop that evening, she went straight to Granny and hugged her.

"Guess where I went last Saturday," she began, but before Granny could speak, Alice told her. "To London ... on the Suffragette march."

Granny frowned. "Oh dear," she sighed. "You are not getting mixed up with those people, are you?"

"Not you as well?" cried Alice, and she left the room.

"Granny," asked Rose, "what do you think about women having the vote?"

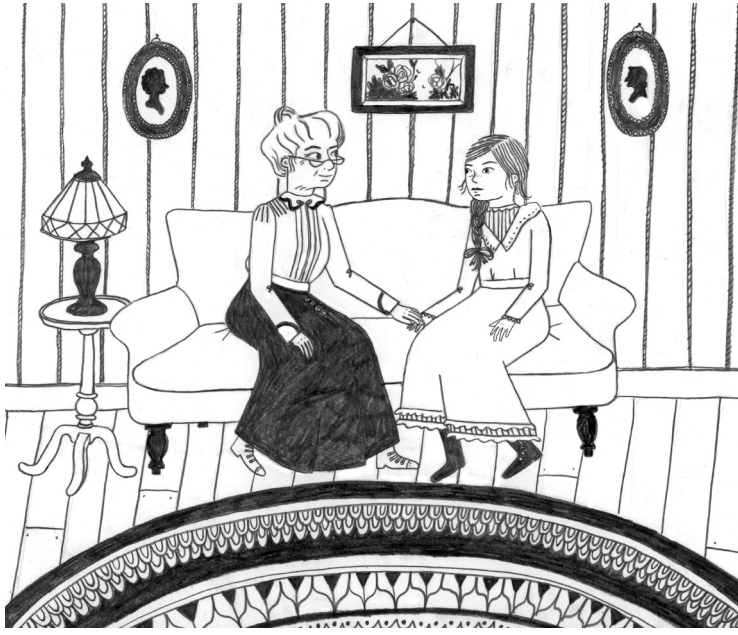
"I am all for it, of course!" said Granny.

"Really?"

"Yes, I have been campaigning for about 40 years, but I am not a Suffragette. I am a Suffragist. I belong to the NUWSS, under our leader, Mrs Millicent Fawcett. She began her campaign when she was about your age, Rose, and then, in 1866, when she was only 19, she collected signatures to present to Parliament. She has devoted herself to our cause ever since."

"What is the NUWSS?" Rose asked.

"It stands for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. We believe in gaining the vote by persuasion and talk, not by vandalism like the Suffragettes.



Millicent Fawcett said, 'Courage calls to courage everywhere, and its voice cannot be denied.' There are many more of us Suffragists in the NUWSS than in the smaller WSPU, who only began in 1903, you know."

"But, Granny, if you have been campaigning for 40 years, why haven't you succeeded?"

Granny smiled. "It is rather complicated, but we have many people on our side. We will succeed eventually, you mark my words."

"Does Father agree with you? He is your son, after all?"

"No. I am afraid he has always sided with his own father, your grandfather, who died before you were born. This saddens me no end, I can tell you, but we will persuade men eventually that we are their equals."

Tuesday 18th June 1912

Oh dear. Who am I to believe? The three most important women in my life all have completely different opinions. Mother does not need the vote; Granny wants to have the vote, but by peaceful means; Alice has joined the Suffragettes who believe in action and vandalism, it seems.

My big brother, William, is 14 now. I wonder what he thinks. Will he side with Father or be like Freddie? When he comes home from boarding school at the end of this term, I will ask his opinion.