

Backwater Extracts

Chapter III

She propped it open again and began tidying her hair. It must be nearly tea-time. A phrase caught her eye. “The old château where the first years of Adèle’s life were spent was situated in the midst of a high-walled garden. Along one side of the château ran a terrace looking out over a lovely expanse of flower-beds. Beyond was a little pleasaunce¹ surrounded by a miniature wall and threaded by little pathways lined with rose trees. Almost hidden in the high wall was a little doorway. When the doorway was open you could see through into a deep orchard.”² The first tea-bell rang. The figure of Adèle flitting about in an endless summer became again lines of black print. In a moment the girls would come rushing up. Miriam closed the book and turned to the dazzling window. The sun blazed just above the gap in the avenue of poplars. A bright yellow pathway led up through the green of the public cricket ground, pierced the avenue of poplars and disappeared through the further greenery in a curve that was the beginning of its encirclement of the park lake. Coming slowly along the pathway was a little figure dressed bunchily in black. It looked pathetically small and dingy in the bright scene. The afternoon blazed round it. It was something left over. What was the explanation of it? As it came near it seemed to change. It grew real. It was hurrying eagerly along, quite indifferent to the afternoon glory, with little rolling steps that were like the uneven toddling of a child, and carrying a large newspaper whose great sheets, although there was no wind, balled out scarcely controlled by the small hands. Its feathered hat had a wind-blown rakish air. On such a still afternoon. It was thinking and coming along, thinking and thinking and a little angry. What a rum little party,³ murmured Miriam, despising her words and admiring the wild thought-filled little bundle of dingy clothes. Beastly, to be picking up that low kind of slang—not real slang. Just North London sneering. Goo—what a *rum* little party, she declared aloud, flattening herself against the window. Hotly flushing, she recognised that she had been staring at Miss Jenny Perne hurrying in to preside at tea.

¹ **pleasaunce** An enclosed or secluded part of a garden.

² **The old château [...] deep orchard** These are not exact quotations, but a synthesis of parts of the first two chapters of Kavanagh’s *Adèle*.

³ **What a rum little party** Slang: What a strange person.

Chapter VI

One day she left the pathways and strayed amongst pools of shadow lying under the great trees. As she approached the giant trunks and the detail of their shape and colour grew clearer her breathing quickened. She felt her prim bearing about her like a cloak. The reality she had found was leaving her again. Looking up uneasily into the forest of leaves above her head she found them strange. She walked quickly back into the sunlight, gazing reproachfully at the trees. There they were as she had always known them; but between them and herself was her governess' veil, close drawn, holding them sternly away from her. The warm comforting communicative air was round her, but she could not recover its secret. She looked fearfully about her. To get away somewhere by herself every day would not be enough. If that was all she could have, there would come a time when there would be nothing anywhere. For a day or two she came out and walked feverishly about in other parts of the park, resentfully questioning the empty vistas. One afternoon, far away, but coming towards her as if in answer to her question, was the figure of a man walking quickly. For a moment her heart cried out to him. If he would come straight on and, understanding, would walk into her life and she could face things knowing that he was there, the light would come back and would stay until the end—and there would be other lives, on and on. She stood transfixed, trembling. He grew more and more distinct and she saw a handbag and the outline of a bowler hat; a North London clerk hurrying home to tea. With bent head she turned away and dragged her shamed heavy limbs rapidly towards home.

Chapter VI

For the last six weeks of the summer term she sat up night after night propped against her upright pillow and bolster under the gas jet reading her twopenny books in her silent room. Almost every night she read until two o'clock. She felt at once that she was doing wrong; that the secret novel-reading was a thing she could not confess, even to Miss Haddie. She was spending hours of the time that was meant for sleep, for restful preparation for the next day's work, in a "vicious circle" of self-indulgence. It was sin. She had read somewhere that sin promises a satisfaction that it is unable to fulfil. But she found when the house was still and the trams had ceased jingling up and down outside that she grew steady and cool and that she rediscovered the self she had known at home, where the refuge of silence and books was always open. Perhaps that self, leaving others to do the practical things, erecting a little wall of unapproachability between herself and her family that she might be free to dream alone in corners had always been wrong. But it was herself, the nearest most intimate self she had known. And the discovery that it was not dead, that her six months in the German school and the nine long months during which Banbury Park life had drawn a veil even over the little slices of holiday freedom, had not even touched it, brought her warm moments of reassurance. It was not perhaps a "good" self, but it was herself, her own familiar secretly happy and rejoicing self—not dead. Her hands lying on the coverlet knew it. They were again at these moments her own old hands, holding very firmly to things that no one might touch or even approach too nearly, things, everything, the great thing that would some day communicate itself to someone through these secret hands with the strangely thrilling finger-tips. Holding them up in the gaslight she dreamed over their wisdom. They knew everything and held their secret, even from her. She eyed them, communed with them, passionately trusted them. They were not "artistic" or "clever" hands. The fingers did not "taper" nor did the outstretched thumb curl back on itself like a frond—like Nan Babington's. They were long, the tips squarish and firmly padded, the palm square and bony and supple, and the large thumb joint stood away from the rest of the hand like the thumb joint of a man. The right hand was larger than the left, kinder, friendlier, wiser. The expression of the left hand was less reassuring. It was a narrower, lighter hand, more flexible, less sensitive and more even in its touch—more smooth and manageable in playing scales. It seemed to belong to her much less than the right; but when the two were firmly interlocked they made a pleasant curious whole, the right clasping more firmly, its thumb always uppermost, its fingers separated firmly over the back of the left palm, the left hand clinging, its fingers close together against the hard knuckles of the right.

It was only when she was alone and in the intervals of quiet reading that she came into possession of her hands. With others they oppressed her by their size and their lack of feminine expressiveness. No one could fall in love with such hands. Loving her, someone might come to tolerate them. They were utterly unlike Eve's plump, white, inflexible little palms. But they were her strength. They came between her and the world of women. They would be her companions until the end. They would wither. But the bones would not change. The bones would be laid unchanged and wise, in her grave.

Chapter VIII

The brilliant sunlight showed up all the shabbiness of Mr. Green's London suit. He looked even smaller than he did in his holiday tweed. Miriam wanted to call to them and stop them, stop Eve's bright figure and her mop of thickly twisted brown hair and ask her what she was dreaming of, leave the two men there and go back, go out away alone with Eve down to the edge of the sea. She hesitated in her walking, not daring even to glance at her companion who was trudging along with bent head, carrying his large brown leather bag. The street was crowded and she manoeuvred so that everyone they met should pass between them. Perhaps they would be able to reach the station without being obliged to speak to each other. Parrow. It was either quite a nice name or pitiful; like a child trying to say sparrow. Did he know that to other people it was a strange, important sort of name, rounded like the padding in the shoulders of his coat and his blunted features?

Nobody knew him at all well. Not a single person in the world. If he were run over and killed on the way to the station, nobody would ever have known anything about him. . . . People did die like that . . . probably most people; in a minute, alone and unknown; too late to speak.

Something was coming slowly down the middle of the roadway from amongst the confusion of the distant traffic; an elephant—a large grey elephant. Firmly delicately undisturbed by the noise of the street, the huge crimson gold-braided howdah it carried on its back, and the strange, coloured things coming along behind it, the thickening of people on the pavement and the suddenly increased noise of the town, it came stepping. It was wonderful. "Wise and beautiful! Wise and beautiful!" cried a voice far away in Miriam's brain. It's a circus said another voice within her. . . . He doesn't know he's in a circus. . . . She hurried forward to reach Eve. Eve turned a flushed face. "I *say*; it's a circus," said Miriam biting. The blare of a band broke out farther up the street. People were jostled against them by a clown who came bounding and leaping his way along the crowded pavement crying incoherent words with a thrilling blatter of laughter. The elephant was close upon them alone in the road space cleared by its swinging walk. . . . If only everyone would be quiet they could hear the soft padding of its feet. Slowly, gently, modestly it went by followed by a crowd of smaller things; sad-eyed monkeys on horseback in gold coatlets, sullen caged beasts on trolleys drawn by beribboned unblinkered human-looking horses, tall white horses pacing singly by, bearing bobbing princesses and men in masks and cloaks.