

The Diary

The wind swept her to me. That is why I have always loved it--its strength, its hurry! But that night (there was a full moon) I was hurrying down the Paris streets with my collar turned up, cursing the thinness of my jacket, not anticipating with pleasure the chill of my attic room in La Rue Paysane. Near the corner of my street I stopped suddenly to look back. I had heard a crash and then the smothered shouts of men--a general rumble of excited voices. I seemed to be always meeting accidents on the streets, distressing events that sent me home depressed on. Doubtless a pair of hacks had bumped. I rang my bell and scraped about in my pockets for tip for the concierge. He met me with a candle in his hand and his usual "merci, merci, Monsieur" and I brushed past him quickly. My mind was full of indefinable thoughts--I could not imagine what I was trying to think. Standing by my wooden table in the dark I saw again that reckless scramble of people on the street. I seemed to still hear that scraping of wheels, the breaking of boards. That was all--but a strange feeling came over me--that I should have stayed. What made me run down the street--it might have been someone--

The minutes later I was rushing down the steps, knocking on the concierge's window: "S'il vous plait--la porte---ouvrez la porte!" He seemed detestably slow. I could have shouted at him. Once on the street I sped down it breathlessly. There--the people had dispersed, except for a few men who were lingering about. I saw at once that it had been a collision. An old carriage with an auto. I felt, somehow sorry for the battered up old Victoria lying crumpled on its side. It had probably been rolling along at a peaceful gait until the blue automobile wrecked it. Things--and people--are very much alike sometimes. I walked up to the men and inquired about it. Yes, it was a collision--both were trying to get out of the way of a girl and suddenly they crashed. The girl was pulled from beneath the car--apparently severely injured. "Dead?" I asked immediately. "No, but she probably is by this time." I stood there with my hands in my pockets, utterly absorbed in my own thoughts. What a sudden surprising thing this life of ours is--how it comes--and goes, so brilliantly, so pathetically. I had been gazing rather pensively at the old cab, the way its two wheels were crushed under, when suddenly my eyes fell on a notebook lying near them on the pavement. I picked it up, but since it was very dark by now and the gas lamps along the street were distant enough, I was not able to see what sort of book it was. I walked up nearer to the dim lights. The pages were full of handwriting, scrawling-- Without glancing closer at it I strolled back to the men who were still standing on the corner.

"I found this notebook under there."

"So they didn't find everything."

"What shall I do with it? Would you--" I made a move as if to hand it to one of them but they shook their heads. "If it has a name in it mail it tomorrow---if it hasn't it can't be worth sending back." I agreed, rolled the soft notebook up and put it in my pocket and turned my steps homeward again.

By candle light I examined the book. The covers were soft black leather, rather worn around the edges. In the lower left hand corner were the remains of a monogram in gold. The letters were very faint and as far as I could make out were either AS or AR. I looked long at it, rather pensively and when I at last turned over the cover of the book my eyes fell immediately on the scrawling violet colored word which stood out prominently on the white page: PRIVATE. Instinctively I laid my hand over the page, as if I were defending someone. Detestable---this reading of private affairs. It must be returned at once. The name--it's necessary---at least to look for that. Lifting my hand from the page I read the following which was lightly scrawled beneath the word PRIVATE. "The journal of a Young Girl--My Heart. It belongs to me as long as I live. Not until I die must your eyes find me. And then--I give myself up, the very breath of me, not to the earth but to the world. Let them read if they will!"

This was stupendous! I grasped the base of the pewter candlestick and moved it nearer. Again I read the words--this time aloud and I remained so still at the end of them that I laid my hand over my heart so that I might feel its quiet beating. No name. No name! How is it possible? What can I do? Above all this book must be returned to its owner--it would be like taking her heart away from her if it weren't. Suddenly an idea occurred to me: it might not belong to the girl who was injured. There might have been another woman in the collision. And at the same time I had a perfectly sure feeling that it did not.

All night long I wondered about it. I left it lying on the table where I could see it from my bed. Long moonlit shadows crept in through my small windows and the dim walls of the room took on a vital mysterious force. Everything about me seemed to be wide awake--the very air. I could almost see this woman through the few lines she had bared herself with. By morning my plans were to put to work--that of inquiring at the police and the hospitals for the name of the person who was hurt in the collision on the night of the 23rd of November. My efforts seemed futile. Nowhere was I able to discover what had become of the victims of the wreck. The whole incident seemed to have evaporated in most uncanny fashion. Now and then I would stop in my work and try to convince myself that I had dreamed it all. But here was the diary with the worn gold monogram clinging to its corner. Something must be done. I could advertise in the paper. I could not give the book up to anyone else in the world except to AS--there was no persuading me to do that.

At last, for two breathless minutes my efforts seemed to be rewarded. I had come into communication with a hospital which lay on the outskirts of the city. When the voice on the telephone asked me to wait a moment--that some such person might have been brought in on the night of the 23th, I clapped my hands for joy. I described the scene of the disaster, the time of night that it happened and all the details that might be necessary in identifying her. I waited. Then I heard only a few smothered grunts. "Bon--c'est bon---oui---oui. Mais je pense--" "Le nom!" I cried--Je veux le nom!" He asked me to wait and I did so--breathlessly--hopefully. It would begin with A. perhaps Anne --or Anastasia. No, she was an English girl. The voice on the phone again: "Pas de nom--il n!ya pas de nom sur le record." I assured him at once that I would come up to see her--I had something in my possession must be delivered to her at once. Very necessary. "Mais, mon pauvre homme--elle est morte" Morte! Dead! I let the receiver drop from my ear and clutched the phone. Dead--dead. I could think of nothing but the word. My mind was a perfect blank. And thus I stood for at least five minutes in the booth--absolutely motionless, a little chilled. I awoke from my reverie with a start. Suddenly it seemed quite ridiculous. I acted as if I had lost my sister--or mother--or even more than that--my sweetheart. I had never even seen the girl - thousands of accidents were occurring in the world every minute. And yet I could not convince myself that this would mean nothing in my life, that it would pass over like a slight wind. But I could not help that stirring around my heart, that slight ache that pressed down around it.

And I thought of the diary--poor, forlorn remains of a soul--in the hands of a stranger. I drew it out of my coat pocket again and again. There was nothing else to do. Perhaps I was wrong in keeping it. And yet, when I thought of those words--"I give myself up, the very breath of me, not to the earth but to the world", I felt I had a most reverent right to what I found no one would respect it more than I, no one would cherish it more. I felt, somehow, that she might be glad to know it was mine now. Poor dear Anastasia (I could not help calling her that), why did you die? Why did you leave me in such a dark moment? If I am doing you a great wrong, forgive me for it. I follow the beats of my heart.

LENINGRAD March 10

You do not know, dear Sergei, how I love my country. You see, I am refusing to go to America. Isn't it strange? One would think that anyone who is 16 years old would be the most reckless person alive. And Alena Petrovna, all your life you told me you were learning English so that some day you might go to America.

And now Sergei. It was you who influenced my mother to get for me an American governess when I was a child. And somehow she's made me change my mind. I don't care in the least to go--not yet, anyway. If I didn't have a father and mother and sisters perhaps I'd fly over. But don't you dare disturb my peaceful life." I said that like an old maid AND was angry with myself for not knowing better. Lately I seem to have become a very important person. No one else thinks so, and yet I have that feeling.

March 15

Cold winds are blowing and my heart feels as frozen as a river of ice. Sometimes I look at this long room and wonder why I love it. My mother is sitting in the window sewing. She calls to me in Russian, "Alena, tell Tatya to prepare the candles for tonight. Big guests are coming." We have such long halls in our home. I pass through them and begin to gather the silver candlesticks. That is the way it is in my home in Russia--big guest, many guests. The house is brimming for morning till night. Sometimes I think I hate them all. But I forgive them while I sort out the candles. "A candle shall be the light of my life." But tomorrow I must be utterly alone so that I can think.

April

Spring is blowing along the river. I used to think that would never fail to make me happy. But now--I could weep with an inward excitement. My sister Olga is playing the piano. I cannot bear it--that low rumbling, impending sound---as if a great danger were creeping upon us. Am I to suffer? Must I go to understand it? The Great War. And I am far, far away.

May 20

My birthday. There was a great crowd in the salon. They all gazed at me and said they were enraptured. I wanted to run away. My hair had been turned up into an insufferable knot. My bones ached. I wanted nothing more than to be in my nightgown. And, oh, one night when I made myself ready for bed I let my hair down and stood in the window. I unbound the pearls from my neck--"

On and on into the night I read from the diary. Through month of Russia and a young woman's days crowded full of sunshine and storms and distress and joy. Sometimes I turned back a page and read it over again, very slowly forming a picture of the woman who was writing so forlornly and also so rapturously. She was now as clear in my mind's eye as if she stood before me---and yet, do you imagine I could tell you the color of her hair--or her eyes? They might be the glint of gold or the depths of jet for all I knew. She was there, with her vibrant thoughts, her solemn, old world manner. Often I caught myself saying aloud: "Yes, Alena, I understand you."

And then for a long while there was nothing. Only a line here and there overcast with gloom. Those were the months just before the end of the First Great War. "I cannot endure this tension any longer. Why will someone not tell me? Why does my father wear a mask upon his face? " And again, "It cannot be true--what is being said. Russian against Russian! What would happen if--Sergei, why did you go away? I should have felt safe with you by my side. And now, the country seems to be creeping about me in an awful, mysterious way that I cannot understand. I cannot understand. I cannot penetrate the undercurrent of it. I have heard, indirectly, of such terrible things that are happening in the more distant parts of the country."

Here and there a few paragraphs in Russian written nervously and sprawling across the pages. Then a blank, and on the 25th of April, 1918 the words: "Dear God, help me! Hear my prayer--" The words were written slowly, I could see, as if she was preying between the letters--terrified--. I remember the way the rain was beating against my window panes as I read that. How I stopped, arose and walked up to them and put my forehead against the coolness of the glass. Outside the old gray building seemed to be battling against the wind. The lights that flashed here and there looked to me like tragic eyes. There was such a wailing in the air--as if the world were a wild reckless sort of place. I thought about Alena as I clutched the book in my hand. Should I ever be able to get her out of my mind--the brave, helpless creature who had taken such a hold upon me? Moving back to the table again I turned over the next pages of the diary. What years had elapsed, and no record. Only, as I read on, I saw that she had gone back to impressions of those months. The rest of the entries were dated from Paris. Her handwriting seemed to have changed--to a more forceful, yet somehow careless script. And yet, the way she crossed her t's was the same as ever. "But, dear Sergei, I want so hard to forget. I must forget, or I shall lose my mind. But it keeps surging back to my brain, insistent, cruel-- to remind me of all I have suffered. I pray for relief--it does no good. I only cry myself to sleep. Must I live ever with these thoughts? I cannot. I cannot. The way I stood against the wall in that gloom eaten house--and across from me in the corner between the two doors--our kind white-haired old general. I heard the shot and then the thump of his body, and I saw the blood trickling on the floor. When I drew my stiff hand from my face I looked across the General--his eye--out--out of his head. I felt myself suffocating, my throat dry and parched, my lips bleeding. And then my father lay before my feet gasping, wringing his hands, twitching his head. "Hide! Hide!" he hissed out at me, "I --I hear them---" I remember the way I slid behind that door. I wanted more than anything in the world to clutch my father, to never, never let him go. I needed someone in that agony, that torture. And he was--and then they shot him--and black rain poured down upon me----"

I remember how my candle spluttered and how I bent my head upon the table. Alena was looking at me with her tragic eyes. Life held such a deep meaning for me then. If I could only tell her. "There is nothing more pathetic in all the world than to be lonely," she wrote. Sometimes my soul becomes so cold, so hard, that I think I must die. And there is not even one near me to beg me not to want that. Oh, to be loved! Do you know what that is?? They seem so far away, those times. Sometimes I find myself forgetting all about them and thinking that all my life I must have been a waif in Paris. I smile at the hideousness of that"

October 10. "I have sold my last jewels. In another month, if I do not find work, I shall have to begin to starve. Oh, the agony of parting with the emerald--I remember how my father used to hold it to the light and rub it on his coat sleeve and smile at me."

November 15. "Today I shall try to be brave. I keep telling myself that I am courageous. I walked past a lighted window on the Avenue today and saw a man who looked like Sergei. But Sergei is dead. A little child was throwing flowers in the air and trying to catch them in his moth as they gloated down,

November 24. Today M. Le Panon gave me his mending to do. He says I can make a few francs if my mind is set rightly. Oh, Lord, I pray that my fingers are nimble.

December 5. I come home so exhausted these days that I can do no more than undress and creep into my wooden bed. I have no time to think of diaries. It depresses me--this sameness of existence. I think I could work twice as hard if I had within my mind the security of the future. but, oh, how hopeless, how pitifully hopeless this is. What am I working for--will it be always the same--until I am old and bent? I cannot think that--I dare not. These inevitable dreams about home make the awakening so hard.

January 13. Oh, they are good--they are good to me. For that I am more thankful than the world knows. My dear little children--to have them actually love me. The feel of their little hands around my neck. Yes, this is Alena Petrovna--this is the governess speaking!"

And then a long interval of time elapsed. A year later this brief message, dated November. The letters were large looking almost like a child's hand. "Good-bye, dear heart, goodbye, Alena Petrovna. You look so wistful standing out there in the moonlight. I wish I could--no, I must not run back. It is too late. And I am so tired--"

That was all. That was the end. Suddenly I found myself staring fixedly ahead of me. I told myself that I understood. It was pathetically clear to me now. Alena Petrovna had simply grown tired of life. And on that night, when the strong November gusts were blowing through the streets, she had given up her soul, not to the earth but to the world. And I, who had been so close to her at that tragic, infinite moment, I might have loved her. And so I sat the long night through with my man's tears and the soul of Alena Petrovna. Early in the dawn my candle flickered its last and I arose like one who had lived a dream.