

KEPT: AN ALLEGORY

Jane opened her eyes and looked straight at the small boy. Not that she could see much of his face because half of it was covered by regulation anti-glare glasses and his jaw-line, already distinctly angular, had lost any semblance of individuality.

“It’s awake,” he said gleefully. Picking up a stick he pushed it between the bars prodding her bare back forcefully.

“He’s no child,” she thought as her eyes moved slowly away from him and across the dividing bars. Like a medieval demon he was accompanied by several of his kind, all dark glassed, wide mouthed and sharp. Behind them a taller, more rigid figure flicked open a notebook. Her stiffened fingers rang. The group pressed silently against the bars. But this stillness, peculiar and sinister, was broken by a girl shrieking, “I thought you said their faces shone! This one’s doesn’t!

“Oh yes, it does,” objected another in a piercing penny-whistle voice, “a little bit, anyway.”

“That’s right,” remarked the tall figure for it was apparently a school excursion bent on combining erudition with enjoyment. “It’s just been admitted. In a few days it will be bright like the rest.”

Jane continued to stare at them. There was hardly any difference between the sexes for they all wore dark tunics and their faces, though obscured, bore a terrifying resemblance. It was only their shaven heads that differed for the boys were stamped with black and the girls with grey. They looked like bullets. Black bullets on thin, thin sticks. Or row on row of bayonets. Or spears stuck in the sand defying the sky and stretching until they merged into a black mass on the horizon. Field after field of them and then more fields. But these fields were not filled with mid-summer maize, nor fields of flowers, even those of

Flanders, sacrificial yet free. They were stacked with starkly stamped sentinels land-mining earth itself and she dared not walk with them, for to touch the ground was death, and the way impassable.

The boy's attention had meanwhile wandered back to her and he jabbed her once again.

"Sit!" he commanded, "sit!"

She did not respond but lay perfectly still staring up at the teacher. She had often trembled as the sun had grown rapidly weaker and long, grey shadows had greedily cancered the earth, but now that she was here, now that she had been forced into this ferocious precinct she was in some ways past feeling, almost past fear, and strangely calm although she was conscious of being drawn ever deeper into dark.

It was beyond her now. Instead of the frightful thoughts which had bayed during the last bitter winter, gentler thoughts poured over her catching the absent sun's translucent beauty. There was laughter from an ancient oak which was somehow a pirate's ship decked with fluttering emerald flags, there was golden hair, soft as purest silk, there was song and Sunday school, Amelia Ann Stiggins and Mozart, crumpets and stained glass windows, and there, like the climax of a great weaving fugue, was John.

Vaguely she heard the whistling tone.

"It's shining more! Look! It's shining more!"

Languidly she opened her eyes. They were still there. The boy was prodding her energetically and others were shying acorns at her through the bars as if she was a funfair clown waiting to have its hat knocked off.

"I hit it every time!" shouted a girl. "But the stupid thing didn't even move!"

Yet, though immobile, she was not past pain. She felt as if she was at the bottom of a well stocked freezer, as if she was nothing but a neat, square labeled package pressed by an immense and intolerable weight which she could not budge and which froze all her fragrance for life and warmth, thought and love, faith and hope.

At last, managing to turn her head from where it lay almost disembodied on the concrete slab, she spoke to the teacher, slowly enunciating each syllable so that her voice seemed to cross a deep void and come from another sphere.

“A millstone. A millstone. Far better a millstone.”

“It’s mad! It’s mad!” shrieked a boy delightedly jumping up and down without bending his knees. “I wanted to see a mad one! Poke it again! Maybe it’ll talk some more!”

But Jane lay perfectly still.

“Don’t quote to me,” rasped the teacher. She pivoted awkwardly. “We’ll find another specimen in the next cage,” she said to the children and marched down the path. They clattered after her, their boots ringing robustly on the drab cement slabs, left, right, left right. But they were children, mere children.

“Better a millstone,” muttered Jane. “Better.”

It was an hour before she regained consciousness. Opening her eyes she could feel the warmth of John’s arms as he cradled her during their flight, and this warmth, burning intensely, radiated and cast a constant glow on the surrounding gloom. But it was only a dream. The pain of waking was awful. She shut her eyes. Perhaps she could catch the joy and preserve it so all its rich and shimmering colors could be treasured for moments such as these. But it was no use. Already her glow was fading, and as it faded she shivered in the alien air.

Young men shall see visions and old men dream dreams.

“What of me?”ⁱ she asked in anguish. She shut her eyes trying not to see the bars or the motionless monkey’s swing dangling from a rotten rope, or the dark-glassed old man who was jerking his trolley down the path . She watched his stiff movements, his strongly riveted knees, his face cut of steel. He was getting nearer. Much nearer. She lost her breath. Think of something else! Anything! Anything but that old man! Like spring water words welled up. “Whatever is good, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, think of these things.” Yet had there been anything lovely since Jinny had left three years ago?

“I don’t see why I should die!” I’m fifteen! Can’t you understand?” Jinny had cried hysterically. “I want to live!”

“Jinny, this isn’t life!” John had exclaimed.

“Stop preaching! Can’t you see it’s not like before? You’ve got to choose now!”

And she had chosen. She had gone. Gone without a glance at them. Out into night.

Jane shook her head desperately. Think! Think of a small handful of flowers, of a crayoned note next to their bed, of its message, “Sori I was so nawty.” Think of bits of bread, of ducks, white ones, brown speckled ones, velvety green ones, ones with yellow feet, ones with pink feet, ones with grey stockings, of the lake and rowing boats, ice cream cones and picnics under firs, of baking cakes and faces smeared with chocolate joy, of sleeping babies, kisses, of pink-fleshed watermelons and glassy pips.

Had it come to this? First Jinny. Then Joe. And John? Darling John. Gone. Though not like the children. Where was he? She closed her eyes. But she couldn’t ignore that roar. Primeval. Primitive. Savage as those who strode the earth.

The old man had left his trolley and was unbarring the anteroom of the lion's cage. He whistled raucously as he worked. The iron gate clanged violently as the lion stalked round and round, faster and faster without deviation or pause, silent now, intent on the keeper.

Jane shuddered and turned involuntarily from the trolley. It was filled with a brilliance that conquered the miasmic gloom casting a golden ray across the path and into the cage, warming her briefly. But she could not look at it even though she knew it was merely the mantles of triumph ecstatically thrown off so the actual could be clothed in immortality, for she had not yet reached that point.

She had struggled a long way and it seemed eons since she had started. From the sunlit, daisy-strewn path she'd walked through meadows marred by an occasional tree casting unwelcome shade, down lanes which had become increasingly dull and whose hedges had encroached on the path so that light was completely obliterated until, finally, she found herself hemmed in by jungle. Yet even then she could not accept it. Though the sunlight had darkened and not a sliver of light had fallen on her as she pushed aside the grasping undergrowth, the light within her had grown steadily stronger so that the dark patches, even those first small patches in the sunlit meadow, had served only to strengthen it until she, too, had begun to glow like the discarded mantles on the trolley.

When the class saw her the next day, she was standing motionless at the back of the cage. Night had slunk off and been replaced by a tangible grayness which wrapped everything in slimy film. The sun crouched on the horizon like a tired toad, while across the sky drifted endless strands of black smoke which rose from no particular point and had neither direction nor impetus, for nothing disturbed their course or came like a cleansing force to harry them away.

The bunch, gazing at her, were stiff as rigor mortis, uniformed and stamped. Only their size and shape proclaimed their youth. Lost in thought, Jane appeared not to see them. Her head was tilted slightly and her eyes penetrated the roof, soaring through the slime and clouds to a sky blazing eternally in a new heaven that needed neither sun nor moon.

“It’s a funny thing,” remarked a young fellow with a mouth like a ventriloquist’s doll, “that glow that sort of comes out of it like the others – I can’t believe that they’re related to us.”

“Maybe they are – if you go back far enough,” said another. “Like those in the Natural History Museum. They’ve got a statue there from that ancient cathedral before it was blown up and it looks a bit like this.”

“Yes, it does. I’ve seen it,” agreed a girl scratching her shaven head with stiff fingers. “It doesn’t stand firmly on the ground like us. It sort of floats like this one is doing and folds its hands under its chin. Look at it. Why does it do that?”

No one had any idea. They gaped at Jane as she continued to pray. As her fervency increased she swayed lightly on her feet and clasped her hands gently together. Her lips moved but no sound came from them or, if it did, it was inaudible to the group standing in front.

“Deliver us from evil,” she prayed as she had for as long as she could remember, as she had when John and she were first married and evil was remote and incomprehensible, and as she had each day in the tranquility of their home. “Deliver us from evil,” she had prayed, “all four of us. Keep John and Jinny and Joe and me for your name’s sake.” And so she prayed now but with an intensity unknown in the halcyon days when John was preparing a sermon in his study or visiting the sick, and Joe and Jinny were in the garden or practicing the piano. There had been little need then. But now, deliver us from evil when we are delivered right into it and goodness has become a

memory constantly bombarded, when Joe and Jinny have gone, have left the light in which they were loved to embrace the demon of dark, when John had been taken she knew not where, now this was all that mattered. And so she prayed knowing finally what evil was, having felt its horror strip her of everything, leaving her as destitute of earthly support as she stood physically naked. Only faith remained burning with a passion unimaginable in the Sundays of the past.

Yet without the past she could not have survived. For she had no doubt it was those like her and not the others who would survive. It was only they who carried the light within themselves living for its eternal flaming, it was they and not the others who ran the race and would be laurel-wreathed. But there were two amongst those for whom she prayed fervently, two who had begun the race, but being weaker had tired, and, seeing cliffs of terror along which the track led, had fallen.

Her eyes returned to the darkened cage and moved across the bars to the gaping teenagers. If one was Jinny she would never know!. They were so uniform, so changed. Perhaps one was Jinny! Or Joe! Involuntarily she stretched out her arms and the yearning and hope in her face made them start back in fright.

“Fear him who can destroy body and soul,” she cried passionately. They laughed and came back to the bars.

They’re always talking about soul, whatever it is,” remarked one.

“I’d be more worried about body!” laughed another cocking his head towards her.

She struggled to speak. Perhaps Joe or Jinny was there! Perhaps they would listen now! But she could say nothing except repeat her cry, “Fear him who can destroy body and soul!”

At last, with a great sigh, she sank exhausted to the ground. But the glow surrounding her emaciated limbs grew steadily brighter until it forced them to cover their dark glasses with trembling hands and stagger gasping back into gloom.

Shortly after, the keeper trundled his trolley up to the cage. The handles clattered on the cement slabs, several buckets slid roughly to one side slopping rancid soup on the ground. Bending from the waist, he levered a bucket out of the trolley, tossed the soup through the bars into a trough, splattering the floor. "Eat it!" he shouted harshly. "It will stop you from shining!"

She turned her eyes slowly from the stinking trough knowing instinctively that this food, while sustaining the others, would poison her. She retched.

"You dumb idiot!" he shouted tossing the last bit over her. "That's all you'll get!"

"Man shall not live by bread alone," she gasped.

"See how quickly you'll die then," he answered giving the trolley a surly shove towards the next cage.

She turned from the wall so as not to see the food, for she was ravenous and realized that even as she looked at it her brightness flickered like a light about to go out.

"Eat it up! Eat it up!" urged a girl of about eighteen who had emerged from the gloom. She ground the words out harshly. "Eat it up! Get better!"

Jane stared in disbelief. No one had shown care before. Not that this was care but, from the girl's point of view, perhaps it was.

"Jinny?" she asked hesitantly, "Jinny?" For there was no resemblance in this girl's fixed face to the varied expressions which had constantly animated hers.

"Eat it up!" insisted the girl.

Jane ran to the bars. "Jinny?," she cried. "Jinny?"

The girl leapt back terrified.

“Go away! Leave me alone!” she screamed.

Thrusting her arms through the bars, Jane called joyously, “Jinny! Jinny!”

But the girl cowered away from her, covering her face with unbending fingers and uttering harshly bitter sounds although no brightness touched her.

Fluttering helplessly as a trapped butterfly, Jane continued to call and beat against the cold steel bars until at length she collapsed against them and slid to the ground.

When Jane came round she saw the keeper pushing his laden and brilliant trolley towards the lion’s cage. He was muttering in a rapid, staccato fashion and had to stop every few feet to turn his back on the light filtering from the cages lining the path. It was early morning and another grey wintry day. No light managed to pierce or alleviate its opacity, even the brightness on the trolley, so alien here, was like a sun imprisoned by its surroundings.

When she had first seen the trolley, she had been able to distinguish nothing except a bright mass in which patches of light shimmered like gold or daffodils trembling in a spring breeze. Now, as she looked at it, she saw distinct forms of varied shape and size, each haloed by its own light and differing from the others in every respect except purity. With immense longing she scanned the forms, but the keeper was walking quickly for it was cold and he passed her cage before she could distinguish a single feature. But she was sure, now.

Jane turned and saw two teenagers standing at the bars. A boy and a girl. Was it yesterday’s girl? They were all cut with the same die and it was impossible to tell. They were talking but she could not distinguish the words which sounded at first like outbursts of distant shot. The boy glanced furtively in her direction but, finding her eyes staring back, looked away immediately. They stood for a long time, an hour at least. The girl did not stop talking even when the boy occasionally interrupted. It was he who glanced frequently at Jane, each time

with greater intensity. Somehow they reminded her of Joe and Jinny. Joe used to swing his leg when he disagreed with Jinny, while she would insistently raise her voice as this girl was doing now. There was a clank. The boy's leg had suddenly swung up and bumped the bars. It swung up again looking like an attached peg and not an integral part of him.

"I don't think you're right," he said quite plainly. The girl gripped his arm, hissing insistently.

He wrenched himself free and continued, "I think we've been wrong all the time. I remember now."

Turning his back on the girl he gazed through the bars meeting Jane's eyes for the first time.

The girl hissed louder and louder, spitting out the words. Yet still he did not seem to hear. She shook him violently but he moved away staring steadily at Jane.

"Joe!" screamed the girl. "Come away! You're shining too!"

And he was. Jane saw he was shimmering just as she and John had before they were separated. But his shining progressed far more quickly. Light flickered over his bullet shaped skull and almost immediately blonde hair grew and curled exactly as she remembered at the nape of his neck. His glasses fell and smashed on the concrete slab. His tunic disappeared and light dancing over his face illuminated it so that she saw quite plainly the instantaneous change from harshness to decision from uniformity to individuality, from rigidity to life.

"Joe!" screamed the girl cowering from him. "Joe, come back! I'm all alone!"

But it was too late, for he was flaming like molten joy being poured into a new mould. The keepers, hearing her screams, rushed towards them from all directions, lashing their whips.

"Catch it!" they yelled in a staccato unison.

But the light was so brilliant they could not approach Joe and fell back covering their glasses with frenzied hands and bending their faces to the concrete slabs until eventually the dazzling light dimmed and only a calm light, similar to the early mornings of far-off days, radiated from the still form on the ground.

They got up and jerkily bundled the still form on to a trolley which was already piled high. They did not look at Jane who, raising her arms, danced with bright ecstasy like a minute candle flashing in utter darkness.

“Dead”, said the girl bitterly. “Dead. Dad. Joe. Dead.”

She flung her body with a fearful clang against the cage until she seemed just another rigid bar supporting chattering metallic teeth as she tried desperately to speak. The warmth and light radiating from Jane reached longingly towards the stiff form but could not touch it. Rather it seemed as if Jane’s light, growing visibly stronger and flashing brilliantly towards the bent form, was opposed by a vast black weight cruelly pressing on that form and engulfing it until it could no longer be distinguished.

“Dead. Dead, You, too!” a distinct wail came from the darkness.

“Not dead, but living!” cried Jane triumphantly. “My God is the God of the living!” And she shimmered and shone.

“Dead!” shrieked the voice from the darkness again. “Dead!”

“I go to my Father,” cried Jane fluttering above the cage and glowing incandescently.

“Father!” she cried with great certainty, “Father, by the blood of your Son, let my child be light. Into your hands I commit our spirits!”

She rose and flamed like the heart of a furnace. Then she, too, had gone.

And from the depths of outer darkness, a tiny light shone.

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