ARNOLD BENNETT

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EAN 8596547161844

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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PART I

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I

The Girl Alone

Lilian, in dark blue office frock with an embroidered red line round the neck and detachable black wristlets that preserved the ends of the sleeves from dust and friction, sat idle at her flat desk in what was called "the small room" at Felix Grig's establishment in Clifford Street, off Bond Street. There were three desks, three typewriting machines and three green-shaded lamps. Only Lilian's lamp was lighted, and she sat alone, with darkness above her chestnut hair and about her, and a circle of radiance below. She was twenty-three. Through the drawn blind of the window could just be discerned the backs of the letters of words painted on the glass: "Felix Grig. Typewriting Office. Open day and night." Seen from the street the legend stood out black and clear against the faintly glowing blind. It was 11 P.M.

That a beautiful young girl, created for pleasure and affection and expensive flattery, should be sitting by herself

at 11 P.M. in a gloomy office in Clifford Street, in the centre of the luxurious, pleasure-mad, love-mad West End of London seemed shocking and contrary to nature, and Lilian certainly so regarded it. She pictured the shut shops, and shops and yet again shops, filled with elegance and costliness--robes, hats, stockings, shoes, gloves, incredibly fine lingerie, furs, jewels, perfumes--designed and confected for the setting-off of just such young attractiveness as hers. She pictured herself rifling those deserted and silent shops by some magic means and emerging safe, undetected, in batiste so rare that her skin blushed through it, in a frock that was priceless and yet nothing at all, and in warm marvellous sables that no blast of wind or misfortune could ever penetrate--and diamonds in her hair. She pictured thousands of smart women, with imperious command over rich, attendant males, who at that very moment were moving quickly in automobiles from theatres towards the dancing-clubs that clustered round Felix Grig's typewriting office. At that very moment she herself ought to have been dancing. Not in a smart club; no! Only in the basement of a house where an acquaintance of hers lodged; and only with clerks and things like that; and only to a gramophone. But still a dance, a respite from the immense ennui and solitude called existence!

She had been kept late at the office because of Miss Grig's failure to arrive. Miss Grig, sister of Felix, was the mainspring of the establishment, which, except financially, belonged much more to her than to Felix. Miss Grig energized it, organized it, and disciplined it, in addition to loving it. Hers had been the idea--not quite original, but

none the less very valuable as an advertisement--of remaining open all night. Clever men would tell simpletons in men's clubs about the typewriting office that was never closed--example of the inexhaustible wonderfulness of a great capital!--and would sometimes with a wink and a single phrase endow the office with a dubious and exciting reputation. Miss Grig herself was the chief night-watcher. She exulted in vigils. After attendance in the afternoon, if her health was reasonably good, she would come on duty again at 8 P.M. and go home by an early Tube train on the following morning. One of the day staff would remain until 8 P.M. in order to hand over to her; as a recompense this girl would be let off at 4 P.M. instead of 6 P.M. the next day. Justice reigned; and all the organization for dealing with rushes of work was inspired by Miss Grig's own admirable ideas of justice.

On this night Lilian had been appointed to stay till 8 o'clock. Eight o'clock--no Miss Grig. Eight-thirty o'clock--no Miss Grig. Nine, nine-thirty, ten o'clock--no Miss Grig. And now eleven o'clock and no Miss Grig. It was unprecedented and dreadfully disturbing. Lilian even foresaw a lonely, horrible night in the office, with nothing but tea, bread-and-butter, and the living gas-stove to comfort her. Agonizing prospect! She had spent nights in the office before, but never alone. She felt that she simply could not support the ordeal; yet--such was the moral, invisible empire of absent Miss Grig--she dared not shut up the office and depart. The office naturally had a telephone, but most absurdly there was no telephone at the Grigs' house--Felix's fault!--and so

Lilian could only speculate upon the explanation of Miss Grig's absence. She speculated melodramatically.

Then her lovely little ear, quickened by apprehension, heard footsteps on the lower stairs. Heavy footsteps, but rapid enough! She flew through the ante-room to the outer door and fearfully opened it, and gazed downwards to the electric light that, somehow equivocally, invited wayfarers to pass through the ever-open street door and climb the shadowy steps to the second storey and behold there strange matters.

A villainous old fellow was hurrying up the echoing stairs. He wore a pea-jacket and a red cotton muffler. A moment ago she had had no thought of personal danger. Now, in an instant, she was petrified with fright. Her face turned from rose to grey.... Of course it was a hold-up! Post offices, and box offices of theatres, and even banks had been held up of late. Banks, Felix Grig had heard, were taking precautions. Felix had suggested that he too ought to take precautions--revolvers, alarm-bells, etc.--but Miss Grig, not approving, had smiled her wise, condescending smile, and nothing had been done. Miss Grig (thought Lilian) had no imagination--that was what was wrong with her!

"Miss!" growled hoarsely the oncoming bandit, "give us a match, will ye?"

Yes, they always began thus innocently, did robbers. Lilian tried to speak and could not. She could not even dash within and bang and bolt the door. With certain crises she might possibly be able to deal, but not with this sort of crisis. She was as defenceless as a blossom. She thought passionately that destiny had no right to put her in such a

terrible extremity, and that the whole world was to blame. She felt as once women used to feel in the sack of cities, faint with fear--and streaks of thrilled, eager, voluptuous anticipation running through the fear! She reflected that the matches were on the mantelpiece over the gas-stove.

The man stood on the landing. He had an odour. He was tall; he would have made four of Lilian. She knew that it was ridiculous to retreat into the office and find the matches demanded; she knew that the matches were only a pretext; she knew that she ought to hit on some brilliant expedient for outwitting the bandit and winning eternal glory in the evening papers; but she retreated into the office to find the matches. He followed heavily behind her. He was within her room.... She could not have turned to face him for ropes of great pearls.

"Give us a box, miss. It's a windy night. Two of me lamps is blown out, and I dropped me matches into me tea-can--ha, ha!--and I ain't got no paper to carry a light from me fire, and I ain't seen a bobby for an hour. No, I hain't, though you wouldn't believe me."

Lilian was suddenly blinded by the truth. The roadway of Clifford Street and part of Bond Street was in the midst of a process of deep excavation; it was acutely "up," to the detriment of traffic and trade; and this fellow was the night-watchman who sat in a sentry-box by a burning brazier. She recognized him....

"Thank ye kindly, miss, and may God bless yer! I knowed ye was open all night. Good night. Hope I didn't frighten ye, miss." He laughed grimly, roguishly and honestly.

When he was gone Lilian laughed also, but hysterically. She did not at all want to laugh, but she laughed. Then she dropped into her chair and wept with painful sobbing violence. And as, regaining calm, she realized the horrors which might have happened to her, the resentment in her heart against destiny and against the whole world grew intense and filled her heart to the exclusion of every other feeling.

II

Early Years

Miss Share, as she was addressed in the office, was the only child of an art-master, and until she found the West End she had lived all her life in a long Putney "road," no house of which could truthfully say that it was in any way better than or different from its neighbours. This street realized the ideal of equality before God. It had been Lilian's prison, from which she was let out for regular daily exercise, and she hated it as ardently as any captive ever hated a prison. Lionel Share had had charge over the art side of an enormous polytechnic in another suburb. In youth he had won a national scholarship at South Kensington, and the glory of the scholarship never faded--not even when he was elected President of the Association of Art Masters. He was destined by fate to be a teacher of art, and appointed by

heaven to be a headmaster and to reach the highest height of artistic pedagogy. He understood organization; the handling of committees, of under-masters and of pupils; the filling-up of forms; the engaging of models; and he understood profoundly the craft of pushing pupils successfully through examinations. His name was a sweet odour in the nostrils of the London County Council. He rehabilitated art and artists in Putney, which admitted that it had had quite a wrong notion of art and artists, having hitherto regarded art as unmanly, and artists as queer, loose, bankruptcy-bound fellows; whereas Mr. Share paid his rent promptly, went to Margate for his long holiday, wore a frock-coat, attended church, and had been mentioned as a suitable candidate for the Putney Borough Council. Until Mr. Share Putney had never been able to explain to itself the respectability of the National Gallery, which after all was full of art done by artists. The phenomenon of Mr. Share solved the enigma--the Old Masters must have been like Lionel Share.

At home Mr. Share was a fat man with a black beard and moustache, who adored his daughter and loved his wife. A strict monogamist, whose life would bear the fullest investigation, he was, nevertheless, what is euphemistically called "uxorious." He returned home of a night--often late, on account of evening classes--with ravishment. He knew that his wife and daughter would be ready to receive him, and they were. He kissed and fondled them. He praised them to their faces, asserting that their like could not be discovered among womankind, and he repeated again and again that his little Lilian was very beautiful. He ate and

drank a good supper. If he loved his wife he loved also eating and drinking. Now and then he would arrive with half a bottle of champagne sticking out of his overcoat pocket. Not that he came within a thousand miles of "drinking"! He did not. He would not even keep champagne or any wine (except Australian burgundy) in the house; but he would pop in at the wine merchant's when the fancy took him.

He seldom worried his dears with his professional troubles. Only if organization and committees were specially exasperating would he refer, and then but casually, to the darker side of existence. As for art, he never mentioned it, save to deride some example of "Continental" or "advanced" or "depraved" or "perverse" art (comprehensively described as "futurist") which had regrettably got into the pages of *The Studio*, the only magazine to which he subscribed. Nor did he ever in his prime paint or sketch for pleasure. But at the beginning of every year he would set to work to do a small thing or two for the Royal Academy, which small thing or two were often accepted by the Royal Academy, though never, one is sorry to say, sold. The Royal Academy soirée was Lilian's sole outlet into the great world. She could not, however, be as enthusiastic about it as were her father and mother; for in the privacy of her mind she held the women thereat to be a most dowdy and frumpy lot.

The girl loved her father and mother; she also pitied her mother and hated her father. She pitied her mother for being an utterly acquiescent slave with no will of her own, and hated her father because he had not her ambition to rise above the state of the frumpy middle middle-class--and

for other reasons. The man had realized his own ambitions, and was a merry soul sunk in contentment. The world held nothing that he wanted and did not possess. He looked up to the upper classes without envy or jealousy, and read about them with ingenuous joy. He had no instinct for any sort of elegance.

Lilian was intensely ambitious, yearning after elegance. She saw illustrated advertisements of furniture in *The Studio* and of attire in the daily papers, and compared them with the smug ugliness of the domestic interior and her plain frocks, and was passionately sad. She read about the emancipation of girls and about the "new girl," and compared this winged creature with herself. Writers in newspapers seemed to assume that all girls were new girls, and Lilian knew the awful falsity of the assumption. She rarely left Putney, unless it was to go by motor-bus to Kew Gardens on a Saturday afternoon with papa and mamma. She did not reach the West End once in a thousand years, and when she did she came back tragic. She would have contrived to reach the West End oftener, but, though full of leisure, she had no money for bus fares. Mr. Share never gave her money except for a specific purpose; and she could not complain, for her mother, an ageing woman, never had a penny that she must not account for--not a penny. Never!

Mr. Share could not conceive what either of them could want with loose money. He was not averse, he admitted, from change and progress. With great breadth of mind he admitted that change and progress were inevitable. But his attitude towards these phenomena resembled that of the

young St. Augustine towards another matter, who cried: "Give me chastity, O Lord, but not yet!" In Mr. Share's view his wife and daughter had no business in the world; and indeed his finest pride was to maintain them in complete ignorance of the world. Even during the war he dissuaded Lilian from any war-work, holding that she could most meetly help the Empire to triumph by helping to solace her father in the terrific troubles of keeping a large art school alive under D.O.R.A. and the Conscription Act.

Later, Mrs. Share was struck down by cancer on the liver and died after six months' illness, which cost Mr. Share a considerable amount of money--lavishly squandered, cheerfully paid. Mr. Share was heart-broken; he really grew quite old in a fortnight; and his mute appeal to Lilian for moral succour and the balm of filial tenderness was irresistible. Lilian had lost a mother, but the main fact in the situation was that Mr. Share had lost a peerless wife. Lilian became housekeeper and the two settled down together. Mr. Share adored his daughter more than ever, and more visibly. Her freedom, always excessively limited, was now retrenched. She was transfixed eternally as the old man's prop. Her twenty-first birthday passed, and not a word as to her future, as to a marriage for her, or as to her individuality, desires, hopes! She was papa's cherished darling.

Then Mr. Share caught pneumonia, through devotion to duty, and died in a few days; and at last Lilian felt on her lovely cheek the winds of the world; at last she was free. Of high paternal finance she had never in her life heard one word. In the week following the funeral she learnt that she

would be mistress of the furniture and a little over one hundred pounds net. Mr. Share had illustrated the ancient maxim that it is easier to make money than to keep it. He had held shipping shares too long and had sold a fully paid endowment insurance policy in the vain endeavour to replace by adventurous investment that which the sea had swallowed up. And Lilian was helpless. She could do absolutely nothing that was worth money. She could not begin to earn a livelihood. As for relatives, there was only her father's brother, a Board School teacher with a large vulgar family and an income far too small to permit of generosities. Lilian was first incredulous, then horror-struck.

Leaving the youth of the world to pick up art as best it could without him, and fleeing to join his wife in paradise, the loving, adoring father had in effect abandoned a beautiful idolized daughter to the alternatives of starvation or prostitution. He had shackled her wrists behind her back and hobbled her feet and bequeathed her to wolves. That was what he had done, and what many and many such fathers had done, and still do, to their idolized daughters.

Herein was the root of Lilian's awful burning resentment against the whole world, and of her fierce and terrible determination by fair means or foul to make the world pay. Her soul was a horrid furnace, and if by chance Lionel Share leaned out from the gold bar of heaven and noticed it, the sight must have turned his thoughts towards hell for a pleasant change. She was saved from disaster, from martyrdom, from ignominy, from the unnamable, by the merest fluke. The nurse who tended Lionel Share's last hours was named Grig. This nurse had cousins in the

typewriting business. She had also a very kind heart, a practical mind, and a persuasive manner with cousins.

III

Advice to the Young Beauty

"Come, come now, now poor girl! You surely aren't crying like this because you've been kept away from your dance to-night?"

Lilian gave a great start, and an "Oh!" and, searching hurriedly for a handkerchief inadequate to the damming of torrents, dried up her tears at the source, but could not immediately control the sobs that continued to convulse her whole frame.

"N-no! Mr. Grig," she whimpered feebly.

Then she snatched at a sheet of paper and began to insert it in the machine before her, as though about to start some copying.

"Miss Grig is rather unwell," said Felix Grig. "She insisted that I should come up, and so I came." With that he tactfully left the room, obeying the wise rule of conduct under which a man conquers a woman's weeping by running away from it.

Lilian's face was red; it went still redder. She was tremendously ashamed of being caught blubbering, and by Mr. Grig! It would not have mattered if one of the girls had

surprised her, or even Miss Grig. But Mr. Grig! Nor would it have mattered so much if circumstances had made possible any pretence, however absurd and false, that she was not in fact crying. But she had been trapped beyond any chance of a face-saving lie. She felt as though she had committed a sexual impropriety and could never look Mr. Grig in the eyes again. At the same time she was profoundly relieved that somebody belonging to the office, and especially a man, had arrived to break her awful solitude....

So Mr. Grig knew that she had a dance that night! There was something piquant and discomposing in that. Gertie Jackson must have chattered to Miss Grig--they were as thick as thieves, those two, or, at any rate, the good-natured Gertie flattered herself that they were--and Miss Grig must have told Felix. (Very discreetly the girls would refer among themselves to Mr. Grig as "Felix.") Brother and sister must have been talking about her and her miserable little dance. Still, a dance was a dance, and the mere word had a glorious sound. Nobody except herself knew that her dance was in a basement.... So he had not come to the office to relieve and reassure her in her unforeseen night-watch, but merely to placate his sister! And how casually, lightly, almost quizzically, he had spoken! She was naught to him--a girl typist, one among a floating population of girl typists.

Miss Grig had no distinction--her ankles proved that--but Felix was distinguished, in manner, in voice, in everything he did. Felix was a swell, like the easy *flâneurs* in Bond Street that she saw when she happened to go out of the office during work-hours. It was said that he had been

married and that his wife had divorced him. Lilian surmised that if the truth were known the wife more than Felix had been to blame.

All these thoughts were mere foam on the great, darkly heaving thought that Felix had horribly misjudged her. Not his fault, of course; but he had misjudged her. Crying for a lost dance, indeed! She terribly wanted him to be made aware that she was only crying because she had experienced an ordeal to which she ought not to have been exposed and to which no girl ought to have been exposed. Miss Grig again! It was Miss Grig, not Felix, who had sneered at hold-ups. There had been no hold-up, but there might have been a hold-up, and, in any case, she had passed through the worst sensations of a hold-up. Scandalous!

Anxious to be effective, she took up the typing of a novel which had been sent in by one of their principal customers, a literary agency, and tried to tap as prosaically as if the hour were 11.30 A.M. instead of 11.30 P.M. Bravado! She knew that she would have to do the faulty sheet again; but she must impress Felix. Then she heard Felix calling from the principals' room:

"Miss Share. Miss *Share*!" A little impatient as usual.

"Yes, Mr. Grig." She rushed to the mirror and patted herself with the tiny sponge that under Miss Grig's orders was supposed to be employed for wetting postage stamps--but never was so employed save in Miss Grig's presence.

"I shall tell him why I was crying," she said to herself as she crossed the ante-room. "And I shall tell him straight."

He was seated on the corner of the table in the principals' room, and rolling a cigarette. He had lighted the