A Free Woman

George Gissing

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Charlotte Grubb, little as she owed her parents, learnt from them the lesson of independence. Going out into the world at twelve years old, she carried with her the habit of mind which views as intolerable any kind of domestic restraint. From the quarrelling of every married couple with whom she was acquainted, Charlotte early perceived that wedlock should be shunned; her natural inclination pointed to the life of celibacy and freedom; she cared not for the romance of the evening byway, and she hated children. She was one of those happy mortals who see the ideal straight before them, and steadily pursue it.

At the tender age of seven, a domestic incident made a strong impression upon her. She had an elder sister, a girl of fifteen, who, in consequence of an accident, underwent a long but not dangerous illness. Her parents tried hard to get the invalid into hospital, but without success. It was not a case for hospital treatment; the father earned substantial wages, and the mother, unburdened by any cares but those of home, might well have tended her sick child. Mrs. Grubb railed and grumbled incessantly, and with such effect, that the invalid, a burden to herself and to every one about her, swallowed a sufficient dose of vermin−killer. Little Charlotte took the lesson to heart, and, from that moment, the whole duty of woman became clear to her.

Among her coevals there was a striking harmony of opinion on this point. Some girls inclined to matrimony; some gave their vote against it no less resolutely than Charlotte herself; but all agreed that the first duty of woman was to have no duty at all. To be sure, 'fellows were brutal; they expected to find their meals cooked and their clothes mended, and all sorts of oppressive things; but most of them could be talked down, or driven to the public−house, by persistent clamour. Children? Why, yes children would come, worse luck But in this part of London babies had a comfortable way of dying pretty young, and one got money from the burial−club; and if they didn't die, well, they didn't, and all one had to do was to get the eldest baby to mind the younger ones.

Charlotte smiled, sure that hers was the more excellent way.

As she grew older, everything she saw and read and heard confirmed her in abhorrence of domesticity. A sharp young woman, she needed no academic training to become aware of the movements of the time which chiefly concerned her. It must not be supposed that female emancipation, in the larger sense, is discussed only among educated women the factory, the work−room, the doss−house, have heard these tidings of great joy. Charlotte Grubb could talk with the best on that glorious claim of woman to take her share in 'the work of the world,' and by 'work' she, of course, understood every form of exertion save the domestic. Charlotte could cry aloud that women were no longer to be 'put upon.' Words to that effect caught her eye when she read a Sunday newspaper; the same message was announced at street−corners and in open places when workwomen went on strike. However dark her mind, this one ray of reflected light had touched upon it, and served for guidance. She knew that women of the higher classes were making speeches, and calling for a great many more or less unintelligible things. For her own part, down here at Haggerston, she would not be wanting to the cause, however simple her service.

When girls 'got into trouble,' she had no language strong enough to utter her contempt. Serve the fools right! If they didn't know more than that gah! They thought the 'fellow' would look after them, did they? Where had they come from? She grew red with scornful laughter.

Once and again, very rarely, indeed, it happened that some acquaintance of hers 'took a place.' Charlotte felt such amazement at this proceeding that she could only turn away, staring blankly. Why, it was worse than getting married! To live, day and night, at beck and call of another woman; to have your victuals measured; to relinquish the freedom of evenings; to wear a distinctive garb was there no poison procurable, no River Thames?

She could boast with perfect truth that, since raw girlhood, she had never lifted her hand in domestic labour. She had never prepared a meal, had never washed a plate, had never sewn a stitch. How did she contrive this untrammelled existence? Charlotte, whose eyes were very wide open, saw and marked the existence of common lodging−houses, an admirable institution. It went hard indeed with her if she could not earn enough to pay for the night's shelter and for ready−cooked meals. She had good health at her own time, in her own way, she was quite willing to work. In the ordinary course of things, her wages more than sufficed for food and lodging; there remained a margin for the theatre, the music−hall, the public−house, the frippery−shop. Should it happen that times were bad, had not excellent people established 'shelters' and 'refuges,' to encourage a spirit of independence among the poor and lowly?

Life was not half bad; London was a fine place. It made her laugh when she heard people complaining, so obviously they had no one but themselves to thank for their miseries. A man whom she admired for his boisterous humour and raffish good looks one day disappeared, deserting a wife and four children; Charlotte admired him none the less. 'Well, I'm sure I can't blime him. He felt it was time to make a new start.' The wife, a burly woman, straightway threw herself and her children on the parish. Charlotte approved, on the whole, yet confessed that she would have preferred to let the parish take care of the children, and quietly go off to 'make a new start' on her own account.

One winter she had an attack of bronchitis; medical help became necessary. Near at hand was a 'dispensary,' where advice and physic might be obtained for a few pence; but, as a matter of principle, Charlotte spent her coppers in getting to the hospital, where she had nothing to pay. The attack owing, of course, to ignorance, or neglect of the simplest precautions took a serious form; she grew frightened. Luckier than her sister long ago, she found a hospital which received her as inpatient, and there spent a very enjoyable Christmas. Kind people sent all manner of seasonable presents for distribution among the sick. Charlotte, just convalescent, lived on exquisite fruit and other dainties suitable to her condition. She read the Christmas Numbers and a novel or two, and made some delightful acquaintances. To enhance her appreciation of all this, a poor, silly relative of hers, who was struggling hard to support an illegitimate child, came one visitors' day to see her.

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The child in her arms stretched hungrily towards a piece of orange.

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