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**Opening Extract from...**

My Story:

# **Suffragette**

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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**London**

**28th March 1909**

Lady Violet Campbell, the owner of this Georgian manor house in the depths of the Gloucestershire countryside, was buried today in the cemetery of the church at Dymock. Lady Violet, whom I loved with all my heart, died peacefully in her sleep six days ago after a short illness.

Many of her family and friends travelled up from London yesterday to be here for the service this morning, and tonight the house is packed to the rafters with sleeping people. Most of them know nothing of my existence and I am keeping myself well hidden.

I made my way here by train from Cheltenham to pay my respects. Charlton Kings is where I live during the week. I lodge with a kind-hearted family who were chosen by the late Lady Violet to look after me during school term. I could have boarded at my school, the Cheltenham Ladies' College, but Lady Violet decided that it would be better for me to share the company of a family.

“Because you have lost your own, dear,” she reasoned.

You would assume from reading this that I am from a wealthy family, that I was born into the upper class, known

here in England as the privileged class, but that is not at all the case.

My name is Dollie Baxter. I am fourteen-and-a-half years old, and I am the only daughter of a working-class man, John Baxter, who spent all his life labouring for a pittance at Bonningtons, one of the two biggest dockyard companies in London. But my father, who was a stevedore by profession, has been dead these past four years. I was ten years old when he passed away and his leaving us changed my life more than I could ever have dreamed was possible. I was uprooted and, quite literally, furnished with a new existence. All that was left of my past were my memories and my name.

So you see, I am a working-class girl of no means, and the knowledge of this fact might better explain my plight now that dear Lady Violet has passed away.

My mother is illiterate. Not a single syllable can she read or write, and nor does she have employment. The opportunities were never made available to her. Still, in a roundabout way, it is due to her illiteracy that I have been given this new life, this splendid opportunity. When my father died she was grieving and almost destitute. The only path open to her was to give me away. Lady Violet offered to take me, in a manner of speaking, and, eventually, my mother accepted.

I have four brothers, all of whom are older than I am. I never see them because they live in the same area as my mother in the East End of London. They have followed

in my father's footsteps and are all employed at the Bonnington dockyards. I suspect that they disapprove of this gift of education that has been settled on me. Perhaps they blame my mother for what she did? Who can say? I cannot answer because I don't know. The important thing for me is that I don't blame her. I firmly believe that she judged it to be the best course open to me and, in any case, she had no real choice.

Lord, I am exhausted. All these memories are distressing. But if I don't write about my situation how else will I ever come to terms with it? I have no one now. I am alone and must find a way to fend for myself. That is the reason for this diary. I shall use it, these blank pages, as I would a friend, a kindly ear, as Lady Violet has always been for me.

There's someone knocking at the door! I'd better stop writing and turn down the gaslight. I will continue later or tomorrow.

### **Later, almost midnight**

That knock gave me quite a fright, but I had no reason to worry. It was Rachel and Sarah. They work in the kitchens here and were bringing me a tray of food. They knew that

I had not eaten since before I set off this morning. I could not be more grateful for their kindnesses. They made up this room for me and welcomed me as the regular visitor I have always been to this house. Of course on previous occasions I had my own suite of rooms and tonight I am up in the staff quarters, but that doesn't really bother me.

Rachel and Sarah sprawled on the bed and chatted while I devoured my vegetable soup and roast chicken. I was ravenous.

"Who's stayed over?" I asked.

"The whole bloomin' family," replied Sarah.

"Lady Flora, too?"

"She's in the room beneath. What a beauty she is. Slender as a stalk of hay." This was Rachel, who always worries that she is fat and plain and will never find a husband. "Are you going to introduce yourself to her, Dollie?"

I shrugged. "Not yet. It's too soon."

"What are you going to do then?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Don't none of them know about you?"

I shook my head.

"Same boat as us you're in then. Out on a limb. We don't know if we'll have jobs this time next week."

"Whoever inherits this house will keep you on. Cook will speak up for you both," I assured them. "I'd help you, if only I could."

They wished me goodnight and we all expressed the desire to meet again before too long when, I hope, all our circumstances will have improved.

They will find positions, no doubt about it. My own situation is more awkward and I have no idea how it will be resolved. You see, I was Lady Violet's secret.

## **29th March 1909, before dawn**

In spite of tiredness, I cannot sleep, so I shall write on.

Yesterday morning I was in a real sweat. I was running late because my journey took longer than I had anticipated. Starting out from Cheltenham, I was obliged to change trains in Gloucester. Unfortunately my first train was delayed, so I missed my connection and had to hang about for the next one. Once aboard I settled to the journey. It was a beautiful morning. Everywhere the fields were carpeted with daffodils. Staring out at the rolling green hillsides, the fresh spring growth, the orchards in bud, ponds with ducks and clear streams with men on the banks fishing for trout, I was marvelling at the sharpness of life beyond the carriage window, while I was en route to say my farewells to the woman who has lavished more generosity on me than any

other. As my train drew closer to its destination, I spied the steeples of the neighbouring parishes, all of which I have explored many times so I know their streets and leafy lanes by heart. It's a glorious sight, I said to myself as the train steamed along. I shall miss it all horribly.

Upon arrival at Dymock, I hared up the hill, muttering crossly to myself about not having taken the dawn train. By the time I reached the village church, which is set back from the road and hidden behind spreading chestnuts and a splendid yew tree, the service was already under way. Try as I might I could not squeeze my way in. It was jam-packed. The crowds were spilling out of the great Norman doorway, pressed up tight against one another on the gravelled path, straining to hear the sermon. Finally I gave up, stepped away from the path and settled on the grass beneath a chestnut tree adorned with sticky buds.

Once the service was over, groups of people began to make their way across the cemetery to the graveside, where the sight of freshly dug earth heaped high made my stomach tight. There must have been more than 400 present. I held back, not only because I had arrived late and felt ashamed for it, but because there were so many faces I wanted to see in the flesh for the first time and because my emotions were at sixes and sevens. What would be my role in this county of Gloucestershire after today? Would I ever set eyes on this place again? I speculated. Who, if I had stepped forward and



announced myself, would have opened their arms to accept me as a Bonnington? Many of the Bonnington clan, as well as the staff from their family house in Cadogan Square in London – all great admirers of Lady Violet – were present. I recognized Flora the instant I set eyes on her.

Well, it was not so difficult. Her picture has frequently appeared in newspapers due to her activities as a prominent suffragist and because she is carving a career for herself in the modern industry of the art of the motion picture. Also her grandmother, Lady Violet, kept dozens of photographs of her all over the house. There's a stunning one on the grand piano in the music room. She spoke of her favourite granddaughter endlessly and with enormous affection and pride. Sometimes it made me quite jealous.

So even though I was seeing Flora for the first time, I felt as though I already knew her. I watched her intently, scrutinizing her. She is every bit as lovely as the world says. How I longed to move up close but, sensitive to her loss and grieving, I kept my distance.

Flora was accompanied by two young men, both of whom are writers and applauded for their poetry: Rupert Brooke and John Drinkwater. Each of them has a small house only a few miles distant from the village of Dymock and they were frequent guests at Lady Violet's dinner parties. I stepped back into the shade as the trio, deep in subdued conversation, passed by. It was not that I wished to avoid them. On the

contrary, they are both fascinating company, but I was not prepared in that moment to be introduced to Flora. It was not the right occasion.

Following behind were Mrs Millicent Fawcett and her equally celebrated sister, Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. Both visited the house during my years there and I was presented to them, but only for split seconds. They worked and campaigned alongside Lady Violet. They are suffragists. In fact, Mrs Fawcett is a very famous name in the fight for women's votes. I have many newspaper cuttings about her and her sister in my suffrage scrapbook.

The Bonnington family and friends encircled the graveside. I easily recognized Henrietta, Flora's older sister, and her husband, Viscount Marsh. He was born in this county – his family own vast acres of arable farmland here – and he and Henrietta met at Lady Violet's many years ago. Their two small sons flanked them. They were also in the company of an elderly, stooped gentleman with grey hair and moustache. I felt my heart race and my blood boil as I stared hard at his face, at his impassive features. Sir Thomas Bonnington, Lady Violet's son-in-law, founder of the Bonnington dockyard empire and my mother's enemy. How she hated him! The accursed man who, she claimed, drove my poor father "to an early grave".

If I stepped forward and announced myself, would the name Baxter mean anything at all to him? That was what I

was asking myself when, all of a sudden, as the vicar was on the point of a prayer, a hush descended even more awesome than the reverence of mourning. A late-arriving carriage had drawn up and out stepped a very stylish woman in her early fifties, dressed in black satin – Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst, the leading figure in the fight for women’s votes. She strode purposefully along the stone pathway. I turned quickly to observe the crowd gathered round the graveside. Many eyes were upon her. Wherever she goes Mrs Pankhurst is greeted with a mixed response. There are those who are full of admiration for her work, for her charismatic manner and her courage and, above all, for the way in which she energizes women of all ages and class to join her cause. Then there are those – and I caught sight of a few of them yesterday morning – who despise her for what she does, for the fact that she, a respectable and well-bred woman, was imprisoned twice last year.

“We are here not because we are law-breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers.” These were her last words to the magistrate at her trial before he found her guilty and ordered her to keep the peace for twelve months or spend three months in Holloway. She chose prison, saying that she would never keep the peace until women were given the same voting rights as men.

Yesterday, Mrs Pankhurst ignored the reactions of the mourners. Instead, she made her way proudly towards Flora

and positioned herself like an older, caring sister, behind her.

To see her standing there, not 50 yards away from me, made my heart quicken. She is a heroine to me. Lady Violet has talked to me on many occasions about the history of the women's movement and the directions the struggle is taking, but I still have much to learn. One day soon, I intend to join them in their fight. Their cause will be my cause! It is already in my heart.

As the coffin was lowered into the ground and the mourners, led by the vicar, recited the final prayer, I kept my distance and my face in shadow. Several local people spied me and nodded to me, but the family paid me no attention. If any had raised their bowed heads and glanced in my direction, they would probably have taken me for a local girl who worked as a kitchen maid up at the manor house. Not in their wildest imaginings could they have guessed what my place in the life of this lady had been.

Once the funeral was over, the crowds began making their way in dribs and drabs through the noon-day sunshine to the carriages and motor cars awaiting them beyond the lychgate at the end of the stone pathway. I hung back until the cemetery had emptied. I wanted the opportunity to say a private and heartfelt thank you to the woman closed within that coffin.

I stayed a while, kneeling on the grass, talking to Lady Violet as though she were present and listening to all that I

was confiding to her. I could picture her grey-haired head, tilted sideways, her deep-blue eyes. It was the way she always looked when she was concentrating. No matter how occupied she was, she always found time for me.

Afterwards, I made my way on foot to the manor house, trudging slowly to the servants' entrance where I knew I would find a welcome. Agnes, the cook, promised to send up a square meal after the guests had all been fed, and Sarah and Rachel hurried away to find clean sheets.

So, here I am, bereft in this attic room. I shall stop writing now and try to get some sleep because I must take a train back to Cheltenham later this morning.

## 1st April 1909

I am back at school, but I don't want to be here any more. I keep thinking about my family. But I can never go back. I promised my mother she'd never see me again. I feel lost, rootless. I want to run away. Perhaps I should change my name, make my way to London and join the Women's Social and Political Union (the WSPU).

I copied a newspaper article pinned to the bulletin board this evening. It reported that twelve female suffrage

demonstrators were arrested outside the House of Commons yesterday. What must it feel like to be arrested?

My English teacher, Mrs Bertram, was not at all cross that I had not written my essay for this afternoon's class. She is usually so strict, but all she said was, "The end of the week will be fine." Mrs Partridge, our headmistress, must have told her about Lady Violet.

## 19th April 1909

I was searching through *The Times* in the library during break this morning when I spotted an article reporting that Mrs Emmeline Pethwick-Lawrence, the treasurer of the WSPU and a personal friend of Emmeline Pankhurst, was released from Holloway prison three days ago after serving a two-month sentence. One thousand supporters were waiting at the gates to cheer her as she walked to freedom. What a splendid moment that must have been. How I would have loved to have been there.

I was about to copy the details into my scrapbook when Miss Manners, the librarian, leaned over. "You have a visitor," she whispered. "Come with me."

I was surprised because I had not been expecting anyone.

She led me to the waiting rooms that adjoin our headmistress's offices and instructed me to wait. About five minutes later, the door reopened and in walked Mrs Partridge followed by Lady Flora! I was amazed.

"Stand up please, Dollie," said Mrs Partridge. "I want to introduce you to Lady Flora Bonnington. She has travelled up from London to speak to you. I shall leave you with her. Remember to deport yourself in the manner of a young lady who is both educated and respectfully modest."

I nodded, and with that we were left alone. I felt awkward and shy, yet thrilled to be standing there with Flora. She stepped forward and brushed her elegant fingers lightly against my cheek.

"Do feel at ease, Dollie. There is no need for us to be formal with one another." She sat as she spoke and gestured to me to follow suit, which I did. "Do you have any idea why I am here?"

I panicked, tongue-tied. I had no notion what she might have learned of me, or what I was expected to answer. So I made no response besides a shrug.

"I think the name of my grandmother, Lady Violet Campbell, means something to you, does it not?"

"But of course," I stammered.

"You were her ward, isn't that so?"

"Yes, I ... I was." I felt the tears welling up in my eyes. Was she here to inform me that I must leave the school? I would

not have minded now that Lady Violet was no longer in Gloucestershire, but where was I to go?

“Mrs Partridge tells me that my grandmother was the one who placed you at this school. She says that you are a hardworking and very gifted student and that you have ambitions to become a journalist. Is that true?”

I nodded.

“Splendid. I also gather that you requested two days’ absence from school to attend Lady Violet’s funeral. Were you there?”

Again I nodded.

“I am sorry that you did not make yourself known to me or to another member of my family.”

“I wanted to, but I didn’t feel that it was correct to intrude.”

At this, Flora smiled. “Forgive my asking, Dollie, but are you an orphan?”

“No. Well, not exactly. My father died a few years ago but my mother, as far as I know, is still living.”

My answer seemed to confuse her. She frowned, fathoming the puzzle – if I had a mother why did I need a guardian?

“This was among my grandmother’s papers,” she said. She fished into her velvet handbag and pulled out an official-looking document. “It is a letter, hand written by her to her solicitor, Mr Makepeace, giving clear and precise instructions for your future.”