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The Eights

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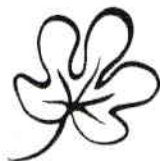


FIG TREE
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I.

Thursday 7 October 1920 (oth Week)

ACADEMIC DRESS

Students are expected to wear the undergraduates' gown and cap of the approved pattern for lectures and tutorials and when they enter any university building. This includes the university church and the libraries.

They are also expected to wear academic dress if they are out after dinner unless they are going by invitation to a private house.

They are required to wear for their examinations a special dress under the gown, namely, a dark coat and skirt and a white blouse with black tie. Shoes and stockings must be black.

On other occasions they are advised to wear under the gown either a dark coat and skirt or a dark coat frock. Bright and light colours are inadmissible.

Caps are retained where the male undergraduate removes his, for example in university ceremonies.

Caps and gowns can be ordered from Oxford tailors and from Messrs Ede & Ravenscroft, 93 & 94 Chancery Road, London. Students with the status of scholar should wear the scholars' and not the commoners' gown.

Miss E. F. Jourdain, Principal

The square cap, made of wool, is an odd sort of thing. Floppy, but pointed at four corners, there is no brim, just a thick felt band secured by a button on either side. Does the band go at the front or back? She has no idea. All she knows, is when she puts it on, she resembles a rotund Tudor courtier in a Hans Holbein portrait, which is surely not the intended effect.

Strange little cap or no, Beatrice Sparks can hardly believe

that she has woken up somewhere other than the cluttered town house in Bloomsbury that has been home for the last twenty-one years. When she said goodbye to her father last night, she felt like a sheet of paper folded in half and torn roughly along the crease. Two smaller versions of herself exist now, each with an edge that is undefined and feathery. Her first day at St Hugh's is an opportunity to rewrite one of these pages.

The mirror on the bedsitter wall is so small that she is forced to back all the way across the room in order to get a glimpse of herself in her commoners' gown. Sold by mail order, the gown sits at her waist rather than the regulation hip and cuts tightly into the shoulders of her jacket; she will simply have to buy a man's size instead. But she is used to the accoutrements of life being ill-fitting; last night, as she tried to sleep, her feet tangled repeatedly with the cold metal rungs of the bedstead. Nobody could ever label Beatrice an average woman; she has inherited her six-foot stature from her father and her hearty appetite for politics from her mother.

To be the daughter of a former student of the college is something, she supposes. A militant suffragette, disciple of Mrs Pankhurst and alumna of the hunger-strike brigade, Beatrice's mother is a woman of considerable renown, who believes in equality for women in education. Hence, there was never any doubt that Beatrice would apply for Oxford, regardless of whether or not matriculation was possible. Thankfully, to her mother's satisfaction both those expectations have become a reality. Most women (and men) are intimidated by Edith Sparks and, as Beatrice knows to her cost, she is a hard woman to please. Fortunately, after more than twenty years of marriage, her husband is still besotted.

Today is unusual because Beatrice is not the sort of person that history happens to. She has certainly witnessed it in the making – her mother has seen to that – but usually from the

sidelines. Beatrice may be fluent in Ancient Greek, propagate orchids in her own greenhouse, attend debates in the House of Commons, and type begging letters on behalf of Serbian orphans, but she has never lived alongside other young women. An only child, she has the singular qualification of having absolutely no friends her own age. What she has discovered of friendship comes from observing her mother's relationships. It occurs to her that these are rather like cocoa; some are too strong, some too weak, and some spoil if left too long. Some even burn the tongue.

Glancing through her ground-floor window, she watches a lone wood pigeon pace the lawn, as if it has lost something, its purply-grey plumage distinct against the wet grass. As she swallows the cold egg on toast the scout has left in an approximation of breakfast, she hears muffled movement in neighbouring rooms. She supposes the other occupants of Corridor Eight must also be forcing balls of toast down dry throats, buttoning too-tight white blouses, adjusting black ties, and shaking the creases out of academic gowns. Like Beatrice, they will walk to the Divinity School in the heart of the city, where at ten o'clock, they will be among the first women to matriculate at Oxford University.

'Good morning. My name is Beatrice Sparks,' she says to her reflection.

She takes a deep breath and reaches for her cap.

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In the adjacent room, Marianne Grey is considering how to tell the principal of St Hugh's that she intends to abandon her degree course after just one day.

Despite the fact that the college was built for purpose only four years ago, Marianne's corner room with its two exterior

walls is undeniably draughty. As if resenting her presence, the mattress exhaled cool air last night as she tossed and turned, and an itchy patch of red scale threatens on her left index finger. Unfortunately, her exhibition of twenty pounds a year, while very welcome, will not stretch to extra buckets of coal so she must make do with the twice-daily fires laid by the scout – if she decides to stay, that is. Her choice is this: remain at St Hugh's to fulfil her life's ambition and continue to build lies upon lies, or give up the whole wretched scheme entirely and go home to the rectory, exercising her brain for the next three years teaching Sunday School and composing the parish newsletter.

She wonders what her father is doing right now. Preparing his sermon, perhaps, or eating a breakfast of crumpets loyally smothered with the appallingly tart gooseberry jam she made over the summer. Mrs Ward, who has Thursdays off, will be taking her granddaughter to visit friends in Abingdon.

Marianne glances at the solitary postcard propped on the mantelpiece featuring Rossetti's Proserpine curved shyly around a bitten pomegranate. Like the goddess of the underworld, Marianne has given in to temptation (the lure of three years of study, in her case) and must pay the price of being separated from home for half the year, although that is where the similarity between them ends; Marianne is well aware she is no goddess or romantic heroine. She may have been christened after Jane Austen's Marianne, but she has none of her namesake's passion and energy. Sadly, she has far more in common with Tennyson's Mariana, a miserable woman shut in a tower, wishing and waiting until it drives her quite mad. Neither character, she is sure, was bothered by the price of coal – or by chilblains.

Glancing in the mirror, she sees an unremarkable woman with hooded eyes, flat chest, and hair the pallor of weak tea. A

woman dressed in a second-hand academic gown and shoes that don't quite fit, trying out a life that isn't quite hers.

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In the room opposite Marianne's, Theodora Greenwood, known to her family and friends affectionately as Dora, is congratulating herself on meeting the simple dress code of subfusc although careful inspection of her attire will reveal an artfully tied black ribbon at her neck, and a silver brooch with diamond chip at her lapel. Her waist-length hair is tightly pinned, all strands accounted for.

How easy life would be, she muses, if she were as neat and tidy on the inside. If her brother could see her now, he would laugh at her square cap, call her an old maid, and pull it down over her eyes. Poor George, who ought to have graduated from Jesus and be running the printworks with Father by now. But then, had George survived Cambrai and all the varied opportunities for death that followed, she would not be sitting here at all; their father would never have permitted it. A different version of Dora – provincial Dora – would most likely be spending her days pouring tea, playing whist, or being paraded at church (*Do not mention novels, Dora*).

But George did not survive Cambrai and Dora is the keeper of their childhood now, the curator of their childhood games, the silly notes, the selfish arguments. Even after three years, it is hard to accept that George and his restless bravado no longer exist. That, like thousands of others, he ran daily into a barrage of hot lead, blade, and shell until his flesh was blasted from his bones. How is it that her handsome, spoilt brother who smelt of grass and sweat and cigarettes, who swore blind her ball was out when it was plainly in, who only wrote her a single letter in his life, can no longer exist?

Unfortunately, she has letters enough to weep over; pages of crooked handwriting smudged with tears and refolded so many times the seams have given way to dust. All written by Charles, to whom, if life were not so despicably cruel, she would now be married. Charles who was to read Law at Queen's. The most popular cadet in the garrison who chose her (*her!*) from all the other girls in town. Charles who, when he led Dora into the bracken, made her feel so alive, so alert, so open to possibility that the plain, ordinary world she knew became a dizzying, shimmering place. Even now, she can conjure the sweet fruitiness of his mouth, the warm breath teasing her neck. Had Charles lived, she would never have wanted to study at Oxford. She would never even have considered it.

So why is she here? So many reasons: to become closer to George and Charles; to escape her mother's overbearing grief and reliance on her; to read and study and play sport as if she were back at school again before everything fell apart; and because she cannot sit at home and become a lonely old maid in a Hertfordshire market town without at least trying to meet somebody new – even if she cannot summon an ounce of interest in any man except the one she cannot have.

As grief knots in her temples and throat, Dora places the lid on the battered cigarette tin where she keeps her hairpins and busies herself rearranging her tennis shoes and hockey boots at the bottom of her wardrobe. She refolds her girdles, stockings, slippers, drawers, and chemises in her dresser and removes the tissue-wrapped corset (her mother's parting gift) and places it under a blanket at the back of the wardrobe. Then she reorders the novels on the shelf into alphabetical order, recalling the pleasure she took in sorting, classifying, and reshelving the stock in the library where she volunteered during the war. Restoring order from chaos, as in a Shakespeare play.

Soon enough, it is eight o'clock, and through the window

she notices that women are already assembling outside the lodge. Glancing at Charles and George on her exit, she walks briskly along the hallway and out on to the busy central corridor that links the west wing of the college to the east. Just ahead of her, a tall woman with broad shoulders is striding along humming to herself, every so often pausing to yank at the gown sliding down one arm. Dora cannot help but wonder if this woman's heart is pumping as furiously as her own and whether she, too, is here to make a fresh start.

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Unlike the others, Ottoline Wallace-Kerr did not sleep in the college last night, but stayed at her aunt's house, in the Norham area, with her sister Gertie. They dressed up for dinner, drank cocktails, played backgammon – a last blast before matriculation. Gertie is always keen to leave her children with Nanny and that dereliction of duty is why Otto keeps having to pinch the spot between her eyes to stave off a headache. The family have absolutely no idea why she is seeing this through when she does not have to. Her mother, furious that Otto refused Teddy's proposal, has not asked once about Oxford. Her father calls her his 'Bluestocking Bismarck' and has never taken her studies seriously. To her parents, Otto is the daughter most likely to laugh at a joke about herself and the first to say, 'Let's go out.' What they do not appreciate is that there is a dead weight inside her that just will not budge in London. If she remains, Otto imagines it dragging her thrashing to the bottom of the Thames. Oxford is her lifebuoy.

The morning is misty, and Gertie insists on driving her over to St Margaret's Road. It is a gesture kindly meant, but Gertie's driving is an acquired taste; even her husband Harry is terrified by it, and he made it through the Somme.

'Here we go, darling,' says Gertie, pulling up to the gates. 'Gosh, it looks rather like a prison. I've a mind to kidnap you and drive you straight back to Mayfair.'

Some of the assembled women turn and stare.

'Oh, do shut up, Gert,' says Otto, jumping out. 'You're just jealous.'

'Perfectly jealous. I'm spitting with envy over your delectable cap. Do buy me one for Christmas.'

'See you for lunch,' says Otto, blowing her a kiss.

Otto enters the gates and looks about for the person in charge. Although she has attended dozens of parties alone, among these sober-looking virgins she is unaccountably jittery. She stands to one side, groping in her pocket for one of the several parting gifts Gertie has given her, a cigarette case engraved with a racing hound at full gallop. It alludes to their old headteacher who often described Otto as being in a perpetual state of motion. *Ottoline rarely sits for long, unless it is to complete complex calculations, something which she does with formidable ease and enviable accuracy*, read her final report.

It is true that mathematics provides moments of absorption and calm for Otto that she cannot replicate by any other means. Even when sleeping, she has the sense that there is somewhere (or someone) else she ought to be. She adores the clarity of mathematics, the certainty of right and wrong. No droning on about different interpretations or writing essays that go around in circles. And of course, being born on the eighth day of the eighth month, eight is her favourite number.

And now, two years after the idea of studying at St Hugh's first came to her, Otto has been allocated a room on Corridor Eight. An auspicious start indeed.

2.

Thursday 7 October 1920 (oth Week)

FIRST-YEARS - ST HUGH'S COLLEGE, 1920

Miss Florence Alderman *Modern History*Miss Josephine Bostwick *English*Miss Patricia Clough *Modern Languages*Miss Sylvia Dodds *Modern History*Miss Joan Evans *Modern Languages*Miss Elizabeth Fullerton-Summers *Modern History*Miss Theodora Greenwood *English*Miss Marianne Grey *English*Miss Yvonne Houghton-Smith *Jurisprudence*Miss Esther Johnson *Modern Languages*Miss Phyllis Knight *English*Miss Katherine Lloyd *Modern Languages*Miss Ivy Nightingale *Lit. Hum.*Miss Rosalind Otley-Burrows *Modern Languages*Miss Beatrice Sparks *PPE*Miss Norah Spurling *Modern History*Miss Celia Thompson-Salt *English*Miss Temperance Underhill *English*Miss Ottoline Wallace-Kerr *Mathematics*Miss Ethel Wilkinson *Modern History*

Miss E. F. Jourdain, Principal

Dora glances at the women assembled alongside her in the courtyard. Although nobody looks particularly clever, the group is an eclectic mix of shabby coats, expensive tailoring, unbrushed hair and carefully pinned curls. The air smells reassuringly of Pears soap and lavender water. She wonders how her brother George felt on the morning of his matriculation; no doubt he was already great pals with everyone and was nursing a headache from too much wine the night before.

‘Congratulations to you all on this momentous occasion,’ says a watery-eyed tutor with a tremulous voice who introduces herself as Miss Lumb. ‘I will be your chaperone on the walk to the Divinity School. Our crocodile will depart early today. There may be crowds and press, so the principal, Miss Jourdain, wants us there in plenty of time.’

Behind Miss Lumb, a gaggle of older students whisper like excited theatregoers.

‘Please arrange yourselves according to corridor,’ says Miss Lumb, pointing to different corners of the courtyard. ‘Corridors Four and Five gather here, Six here, Seven here, and the Eights over there. Your corridors will provide your walking – and cycling – companions for the next few weeks while you orientate yourselves.’

Dora finds herself standing between two young women who introduce themselves as Beatrice Sparks and Marianne Grey. Beatrice, the girl Dora followed down the main corridor, pumps Dora’s hand enthusiastically. As well as being immensely tall, Beatrice has an indistinct jaw, curious eyes and ruddy cheeks. Her fingers are dappled blue with ink. Marianne, in contrast, has a long neck and pale, freckled face. She looks fragile and insubstantial, like a handkerchief worn over time to a mesh of delicate threads. It is strange to think these are the people Dora will spend every day with for the next eight weeks.

A petite woman with skilfully drawn lips ambles over to join them. She has bobbed hair the colour of wet terracotta and is at least a foot shorter than Beatrice. She could have stepped straight from the society pages of one of Dora's magazines.

'Hello, neighbours,' says the redhead, offering a limp hand. A cigarette dangles from her mouth and Dora wonders at her audacity to smoke in public.

'Ottoline Wallace-Kerr,' she says. 'But you can call me Otto.'

Dora recognizes the surname from the nameplate above the door next to hers. This means all four rooms on Corridor Eight are now accounted for.

'Good morning,' says Beatrice cheerfully. 'My name is Beatrice Sparks. Oh, and this is Dora and Marianne.'

'Sparks, I like it. Good name for a brainy sort,' says Otto, directing a plume of smoke over Beatrice's shoulder. She casts an appraising eye over the other women in the courtyard before raising a single pencilled brow. 'Well, tally ho, then.'

And the procession is off, filing out of the gates and on to St Margaret's Road, with the Eights bringing up the rear.

All about them, Oxford is rising. On Banbury Road, omnibuses snort their way towards Cornmarket, bicycles rattle past, and hotels shake out their guests and laundry. On St Giles', male students emerge from sandstone walls to join the swell of movement southwards. Dora is mesmerized by how their mortar boards dip and tilt, the silken tassels swinging. It occurs to her that the women, walking in pairs behind Miss Lumb in their floppy woollen caps, bear a striking resemblance to schoolchildren on an outing.

The crowd about them throngs with boisterous conversation and it is hard to make oneself heard. Some men smile and stand aside gallantly for them, while others shout greetings