

The Flag

MARY FOX

I folded the return train ticket inside my purse and then pushed that inside the satchel strapped across my shoulder. Tucking the green and purple flag as deep into the outside pocket as it would go, I stepped down onto the platform. The steam hissed as the pistons slowly pushed the train away from the station. It was a glorious first Saturday in June.

The throng was so dense as I crossed the course at Tattenham Corner that at times I was swept from my feet and, not being very strong, carried through the air by this shoal of wild excited men crushed together, maybe thirty deep. We squeezed through the gap in the railings and then, like water forced from a gully, sprayed hither and thither across the vast downs.

'Lucky heather, lady?' She thrust a sprig wrapped in tissue with a punch into my chest. The nails were black, the skin as creased and brown as any I had seen before. Next to her, on a fence post, two magpies hopped and cawed, heads cocked sideways. I felt inside my bodice and touched my mother's letter. The gypsy looked me up and down and retracted her offering perhaps realising that I needed more than good luck today.

I moved easily amidst the crowd. I had chosen my darkest dress coat with my bonnet pulled down low so that people might not even guess I was a woman. I had an hour to wait for the last race, so I took the chance to look around.

A section of the grass inside the course was roped off for a fair. Children screamed as they galloped around a track on painted iron horses. A man on stilts proffered toffee apples to an infant but she

bawled in terror. One little girl had her head thrown back, her little body almost paralysed with joy. She reminded me of my own sweet niece and the sadness weighed down on me suddenly, with surprising force. I often felt dizzy these days. My leg had never straightened properly and several of my vertebrae had fused together after I threw myself down the stairs at Holloway. I leant against a post for a moment, breathing deeply to work against the pain that throbbed through my spine.

I took the letter out from my bodice. It was now as soft as calf skin where it had been opened so many times. It read:

My darling Em.

I hope I find you well. It has turned out to be a glorious summer in Morpeth after all. Spring was late coming here this year but now the garden is resplendent with hollyhocks and even the tea-rose you sent me is starting to bloom in Fox Corner. I hope this letter arrives before you go to the Derby in June. Please be careful, my darling Em. I know how impulsive you are and the races attract all sorts of disreputable people.

Also, sweet Em, I had the most disconcerting experience only two days ago. I was just looking out of the kitchen window admiring the garden, when a single magpie landed on the sill. I banged on the glass to shoo it away. But it would not move so I opened the kitchen door and in it flew. I had to chase the terrified thing around, trying to liberate it. In its panic it just flapped and slapped into things, causing the most horrible mess with feathers and excrement everywhere. Finally, it flew up into the chimney breast and disappeared.

I feel it is the most terrible omen, Em. So please be careful. Your fall at Holloway caused me so much heartache and I thought I would lose you then. I know you are so devoted to 'the Cause' and I love your dedication but please try to rest, dearest Em, so your back may heal a little.

I look forward to seeing you later in the summer. We can sit in the garden and drink lemonade and look at the flowers.

*Take good care now and God bless you,
Your loving mother.*

I sniffed the lavender-infused pages of the letter. Oh Mother, if only you were here with me now. I looked down from my vantage point at the top of the hill. There were many tic-tac men standing on

their boxes in the valley at the bottom. Some were in caps, some bare-headed. Some shouted their odds to their comrades. Others gesticulated wildly, tapping their noses and patting the top of their heads. I felt a sudden irrational compulsion to place a bet and walked down to where the men stood. A kindly faced man, with a pencil behind his ear and a notebook in his hand, looked down at me.

'I'll put two shillings on Aboyeur,' I called up to him. He gave me the ticket. To my right-hand side a man in a bowler hat sniggered.

'Aboyeur is the outsider, madam. You'll be wasting your money.' He spoke in an annoying cockney accent heavily laced with hints of faux sophistication and wore his bowler pulled down over greying sideburns. Although the comment was addressed to me he turned to smile at the girl clinging to his arm. She was a small wisp of a thing with white, translucent skin and watery blue eyes. She had far too much makeup on and beneath the pan I could see she had probably not yet reached her seventeenth birthday. She simpered and giggled. He looked down at my purse noticing the green and purple flag sticking out of it. His face darkened.

'So, this is how you lot waste your time is it? Betting on the horses? Shouldn't you be chained to a railing or throwing rocks at the prime minister you dirty whore?' He hissed and then pointed at me. 'Look here,' he shouted to the crowd, 'a filthy suffragette.'

I felt the fear rise up to my throat and my legs moved as though through aspic, but I walked briskly away and tried to lose myself in the throng. Did I really have the stomach for this? I had always thought I was strong enough and yet maybe I misunderstood what strength was. I prayed the courage would come from somewhere when I needed it most.

Ahead stood a group of three plain tents, the only visible shelter I could spot. I ducked in under the flap, hoping to hide from the crowd. It smelt strongly of carbolic soap inside.

'Oh, a lady visitor. That's new. Clean yourself up Minnie.'

In the corner of the tent a wan-faced girl was squatting over a bucket cleaning between her legs with a rag. She hummed to herself as she performed her ablutions, rapt in a reverie of her own.

‘Are you lookin’ for company?’ the girl’s mother laughed. ‘We do get ladies lookin’. We are happy to accommodate all.’

She made a grand sweep with her arm. ‘It’s a crown for a half hour.’ She grinned again, pleased with her own largesse.

‘Oh no. I was just interested in what you were doing.’

‘Oh. That’s my Min. She provides the services. Poor Min’s not got the brains she were born with so I look after his lordship.’

I then realised that the woollen sack in her lap was her grandson: a baby with a face as puce as the knitted suit he was wearing.

‘He can scream like a lord can’t he?’ And with that she unleashed a massive breast from its bodice and stuffed it into the bawling face. I placed a crown in the older lady’s palm and covered her hand tight around it.

‘Please give it to the girl so she can buy the baby a toy,’ I stammered, suddenly ashamed of my full purse. Poor simple Minnie. I could only thank God that she was unaware of the wretchedness of her situation.

The grandmother threw her head back and laughed and I could see that her jaw was almost as toothless as that of the baby suckling at her breast.

‘A toy eh? Some bread would be more bleedin’ use.’ I lifted the flap to leave and checked the man in the bowler was nowhere to be seen.

‘If you can wait a while lovey, she’ll be clean in a minute...’

Glad for the sweet air, I returned to the crowd with the buzz of Minnie’s humming still fresh in my head. Should I have said something to her? Tried to persuade her there was a better way than this? Offered her and her son a home for as long as she needed? But I did none of those things and by being silent, I had colluded. What would happen to her? Now I felt small and very empty like the eye of a storm passing dully through the surrounding chaos.

There was no sign of the man in the bowler hat or his young companion. I chose a hillock close to the children’s enclosure. It afforded me a clear view from Tattenham Corner to the finishing line. Even the steam from the roast chestnut handcart could not obscure the spectacular panorama. From this vantage point the truth assailed me: apart from a few crumpled mothers the only women here were whores, beggars and mistresses. And myself of

course, who, as my mother often joked, was always impossible to categorise.

Feeling ravenously hungry, as though I had been scooped out inside, I planted myself down in the midst of the madness on the first bare patch of grass I could see. My coat pockets were deep and I unwrapped a twist of salt, a hard-boiled egg, a slice of corned beef and some yellow plums from the orchard. A man sitting on his own watched all the while. He had an annoying twinkle in his eye and doffed his hat. I felt the gaze weigh down on me like a hot brand and turned my back to him. But I knew he continued to watch and felt the shadow of his approach until he formed a dark pool all around me.

‘Did you enjoy your picnic?’ I pretended not to hear him. ‘I should think you did. I never thought I would envy a plum.’ He tapped his cane next to me.

‘Look, go away will you?’ I shaded my face with my hand and stared up at him.

‘I can show you something tastier than that old plum. What do you say?’ I turned away, aware of a burning flush rising up from my throat. I felt so angry I could spit.

‘Look. Go away. Please.’ I hissed and stepped back into the shadow, clutching the flag in two white-knuckled claws, holding it out in front of me as though for protection. My hands were shaking – partly in fear, but mainly in anger. From the corner of my eye I saw his face harden as he noticed the green and purple flag and I felt the sharp tap on my back from his cane.

‘Dirty suffrage pig,’ he whispered, and disappeared into the throng.

At that moment, my veins contracted. I felt firework-angry, seething just below my skin, ready to be set off. But I knew I could not respond: not today. I had other work to do. At that moment, a cheer went up from the crowd. A man with a megaphone announced the start of the race, ‘Ladies and Gentlemen. Please place your final bets. The Derby will begin in five minutes’ time. Last call for betting, please. Last call.’ My heart felt as though it would bolt through my chest. I steadied myself and breathed deeply. Should I go back? Oh Mother, help me now. I looked over my shoulder, but the crowd had closed in behind me. No, there was no way back. Forward then.

And in that very moment, just before I stepped out, a kind of ecstasy engulfed me. The same exhilaration I had felt at Holloway the second before I jumped. For although I had known then that the ending would be terrible, I had no control over the moment. I could not stop it. And so it was now. I felt a strange peace, a quietening of the heart, a softening of the limbs. Onward then.

I pushed my way towards the barrier. I made sure I had a good view of the approach to Tattenham corner from where I was standing. I squeezed under it by the side of the course.

‘Oi. We’re all trying to get a good view,’ somebody shouted at me, but I could barely hear with the thunder of hooves approaching and loudest of all, the pumping of blood around my ears and skull.

I stepped out and the first group thundered by. Bunched together in one mass of chestnut flesh and legs flailing and flashes of silk. I was rooted. So close, that clods of earth and dust rained down upon my bonnet and apron. I was baptised with the fat globs of sweat that sprayed from the beautiful beasts and one speck of blood, from the whip of the jockey in gold, struck me on the cheek. The back rider turned to scream a warning to the oncoming horses. Faces contorted into masks of howling confusion, the profanities hailed down upon my head as they swerved by me. One even tried to whip me as he passed.

I stepped forward towards the middle of the course. The roars were deafening as the last beast hurtled towards me. Every vein throbbled through the flesh. The coat shone with a patina of sweat. I could see every sinew of the jockey’s twisted jaw. Man and beast locked in magnificent rhythm. I had the flag in my hand and reached up. A flutter of black and white swooped low, obscuring the blinding sun for a moment.

And then they were upon me.