

THE FACTS OF LIFE

This morning as she went along to school with her sister, she began to worry once more about the young men who hung about the shop fronts waiting for the store to open. She was fourteen, four years younger than her sister who had left school and worked as a bookkeeper in a hat shop. She wore a navy blue tunic, a white blouse, thick wool stockings and heavy shoes. Her body was thick and heavy. It was a half woman's body; her breasts were springing and she was very self-conscious about them. She had a red fat and shiny face, and she carried a brown fibre case in her right hand.

"They stare so," she told her sister. "Sometimes they whistle."

"You don't want to take any notice," her sister said. "I just ignore them."

"I wish they wouldn't stare."

"When you get older you won't mind."

"I don't want to get old, Bet," she said.

"What a silly you are."

Now they began to turn into the main street and she walked closer to her sister. Waiting for their work to begin, young men in navy serge suits leaned against verandah posts and puffed smoke through their noses. A group of five outside the drapery store talked in loud voices and stopped as the girls went past.

"They were talking about us," the young girl said.

Her sister laughed.

"What of it? All men are the same. You don't want to take any notice, Peg."

"What are they like —" she stopped.

"What do you mean?"

"What are they like when you go out with them?" she managed to say.

"Men? Oh, they're all right. Some are nice."

"I wouldn't know what to say."

"You don't have to worry for a while yet."

"No, I'm only fourteen. Sometimes — sometimes, though, I wonder . . ."

Her sister looked at her.

"Has mum been talking to you?" she asked quickly.

“What about?”

“Oh, about men. She said she was going to have a talk with you.”

“She hasn’t said anything.”

The young girl had gone red and she turned her face away. They walked on in silence. She looked at her sister from time to time. She moved the bag about nervously in her hand. Then she began chattering about a school tennis match.

At the hat shop, her sister left her and she went on ahead to school. When she reached it she did not join a group of her friends who were playing basket-ball before the bell rang, but instead went and sat down at her desk. A Palgrave’s *Anthology of English Verse* was open on the desk, but she did not look at it. She was sitting there motionless three minutes later when the bell rang. She got to her feet slowly and went out into the yard.

At lunch time she sat with two of her girl friends under a pepper tree. Presently one of them said:

“Peg, you’re not eating your lunch.”

“I don’t want any,” she said.

Then she burst into tears. The other girls looked at her but did nothing.

Then one said: “What are you howling for?”

“That Billy Fraser,” she said. Tears ran down her face. “He had a mirror during history . . .”

“A mirror?”

“Ye-e-s — he was looking — looking at my legs.”

“I’ll pull his hair for him! Here’s a hanky. Don’t cry.”

“He was — was looking at my legs.”

“You should have slapped his gob!”

“He had a mirror.”

She began to sob wildly and inconsolably. Sitting on the dusty ground, tears ran into the corners of her mouth. Two wet stains showed on her white blouse and her left hand scratched five little runnels in the dust.

“You’re getting yourself into an awful mess. There, there, don’t cry,” one of the girls told her.

She began to sob more loudly.

That afternoon when she came out of the school grounds a man was waiting outside the school. She was alone and he began to follow the girl. His brown trousers were loose-fitting and were heaped above his black shoes. The heels of the shoes were worn down to the uppers. The man had on a grey coat. He had no hat and had not shaved for two days. Wrinkles were under his eyes.

He walked twenty yards behind the girl. Then he came up and spoke to her.

“Do you know where Leason Street is?” he asked.

The girl stopped.

“Yes,” the girl said. “It runs off Church Street.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s up this way — past the church,” she said.

“Is it far?” the man asked.

“It’s not far. You go down this street—then—you turn—.”

“You going that way?” the man asked.

“That’s the way I go home,” the girl said. “I go home that way.”

“Would you show me?” the man asked. “Could I come along with you?”

The girl hesitated.

“I’ll show you the way,” she said. She shook the case with her hand, then she began to walk along the street. The man walked at her side. He looked at the case. Then he put out his hand and took the case from the girl.

“Let me, it’s heavy.”

The girl blushed. Colour ran up her face. Then tears came into her eyes.

“It’s not heavy,” she said.

“I’ll take it,” the man said. His age was about thirty-five. They walked on until they came to the main street. There the man turned aside and she followed him.

“I think it’s quicker this way,” the man said. He led the way to a side street. It was quiet; no one was in sight. The man looked at the girl.

“You’re pretty,” he said. “Did anyone ever tell you that?”

The girl blushed. She could not answer him.

“What is your name?”

“Peggy”.

“Nice name. I bet you got plenty of boy friends?”

He was watching the girl closely.

“I bet you got a boy friend.”

The man came closer. He tickled her in the ribs.

“No boy friends, eh? I bet you have one you sneak away with? One you have fun with?”

The girl’s face was flaming. She hung her head.

The man looked at her. He smiled.

The side street ran on to a road. The girl put her hand on the case.

“I got to hurry now,” she said.

“But Leason Street — ”

"It runs back from here," the girl said.

"Come for a walk with me," the man begged. He smiled at her.

"No. I got to hurry."

"Please," the man said.

"I'm late."

"Just for a few minutes."

The girl hesitated. Then she tugged the bag away from the man.

"No!" she said loudly.

She began to walk quickly along the road. The man watched for a time; then he began to walk after her. The girl saw that she was being followed. She began to walk very fast. Soon she was panting. The road ran away from the town. Her home was half a mile away. Houses were by the roadside but the girl did not stop at any one of them. When she came to a gate she opened it and ran on to a ploughed field. She went through an old orchard and into a deserted hut. The man came after her. He found her standing by the chimney. Tremors were shaking her body. He called to her. Then he seized and bore her down to the floor. He pushed his left hand over her mouth, but she did not try to call out. He fumbled with her clothing, pushing her tunic up under her armpits, his fingers clumsy, his body shaking with desire, his breath coming in sobs. The girl began to struggle. She twisted her head from under his hand and began to scream. The man punched her on the mouth. The screaming died in a moan. Blood ran in her teeth.

Later a farmer found the girl crying. After he had calmed her, he walked home with her. When he was explaining to the girl's mother the girl began to cry. Then she began to beat the farmer about the chest. They seized her arms and quietened her.

That night her mother made her sleep with her in the big double bed. She gathered the girl against her big slack breasts and crooned to her mysterious warnings about sex.