

The Dawn is Breaking by Imogen Hipkin-Holland

“Miss Georgina Mavis Rochford, come down this instant! Today is the day your father is being introduced to the House of Lords!” I was eleven when my father became Lord Rochford. It was also the day our house in London was split into three apartments. I suppose then I didn’t know how much my life would change. That was the day my future was decided. That was the day I became a suffragette.

Our apartment was on the middle floor. The first floor was for sale and the third floor had been bought by two ladies who had a lot of banners and sashes shouting out in bold letters: VOTES OR WOMEN! My father told me to ignore them. He said they were crazy and that a girl like me shouldn’t mix with that sort of riff-raff. But I had always been a curious child and my father’s words hadn’t dimmed my inquisitive mind. One afternoon, when I was 13, I decided to introduce myself to the ladies upstairs. My father was reading out one of his speeches about a topic called Suffragettes. I didn’t know what suffragettes were until the door swung open and a woman who looked quite eccentric called out “Pricilla, darling! We have guests.” A voice came from within “A guest Gertrude, dear. Grammar!”

“Oh Pricilla you are a stickleback”

“It’s a stickler not a stickleback, Gertrude!”

They carried on shouting down the corridor without taking any notice of me. I knew it was unladylike but I could feel a monstrous laugh swelling up inside me. When I started laughing Priscilla and Gertrude stopped yelling and started laughing too. After 5 minutes of raucous laughter we settled down and had tea. They were both quite plump with their hair up in messy buns. They wore white blouses and clean white skirts. I took a sweeping look around their drawing room. It was very tidy with oak furniture but there were newspapers and a bookshelf full of political books no piano or art easel no sewing or embroidery. There was a tool box and many more items that women should never been seen with. When they saw me looking around in amazement they explained.

“We’re Suffragettes! We fight for women’s rights! Men rule and that is wrong, very wrong! We are equal to them!” Priscilla was staring into space with steely look on her face. Gertrude could see Priscilla was in her own world so she said “The march is next Wednesday. I think you would enjoy it. It’s in Hyde Park. Be there! I told my friends, Iris, about the march and she agreed to join me.

I cannot tell you how excited I was that day of the march. From my father’s speeches and my mother’s comment I could see they disapproved of suffragettes so I lied that I was going to the Harrods to do some shopping. Gertrude had lent me two sashes for myself and Iris. We were about to become suffragettes.

We walked into Hyde Park and saw a sea of white, green and purple. A woman was making a speech and the crowd was cheering passionately. Another group of women were fixing banners. Suddenly a voice boomed. “Let the march begin!” Iris who was black eyed and black haired held my hand so tightly I swear she cut off my blood supply! We marched, singing peacefully for one hour until there was a scream. We looked at each other. I could see in Iris’s eyes fear and regret. No one knew what was happening until a voice called out loud and clear “IT’S THE BOBBIES! STAND FIRM LADIES!” No

one ran. But soon no one was holding my hand. I saw Iris kicking and screaming being led away by the police.

“HOW DARE YOU!” my father thundered “NO ONE MUST KNOW THIS! YOU COULD DISGRACE THE FAMILY NAME!” I knew what I was about to say was dangerous but I wanted to vote. I wanted freedom of speech. “I may disgrace the family name but women will look back and applaud me. You may hate me forever more but I dream one day a father can sit by his daughter in the House of Commons. So I will carry on marching until justice has been reached. I will not rest till I can shake equality by the hand. Please do not diminish me. So, father, I beg you do not say it is a stupid dream. Please.”

I made the exact same speech in Hyde Park seven years later. I had never been so proud. Three years later I met a politician called Ernest Ashdown he too wanted votes for women. One year later we were married. 1918 gave us the vote. One battle was won. More will follow.