

I went, as everyone else did, to see the great Ida Aalberg in the role of Nora* – I tried as best I could to keep up with the more notable events of cultural life. But what did I see if not a revelation! My own mutinous longing embodied in a radiant female vision. I could scarcely sit still, so excruciatingly did I suffer at seeing her tighten the noose round her own neck. My eyes were fixed on her as if my very life depended on it. Way up in the gallery where I had my seat, I could feel how ghastly that home was, detestable, claustrophobic, poisoned. I quivered with indignation and could not comprehend why she wavered. Couldn't she see through that man, see how egotistical and ridiculous he was, entirely and utterly unworthy of a woman like her? And the children were the same, of course! I clenched my fists in impotent rage, I clawed at the velvet of the barrier in front of me and in my rash passion whispered proud cues to my heroine.

And look, a miracle has happened! Here she comes in her simple skirt suit – serious, reserved and as unassailable as a fortress. That is how a woman should look!

I must stand entirely alone if I'm to get an understanding of myself and everything outside. That's why I can't stay with you any longer.

My heart is thumping with furious joy, my eyes flash like lightning. Of course that low villain of a husband makes his cloying comments about her most sacred duties, about her husband and children and what people will say.

I have other equally sacred duties ... duties to myself.

My heart laughs with delight. Isn't it wonderful of her to say that! Myself! Just say it straight out, calmly and majestically, as such things should be said. Who can touch her when she says something like that? Yet who thinks it will be enough to silence that popinjay? You might think he'd had as much as he could take, but no! He just keeps parroting his words about wife and mother. Wife and mother above all else, have you ever heard anything like it! I start rising from my seat, muttering my protests, and hear shushing from behind me, but I lean forward in irresistible ecstasy, right out over the railing as if to catch the fervently anticipated closing line in mid-air:

I don't believe that any more. I believe I am first and foremost a human being.

Did you all hear that? First and foremost a human being! I am to think things through for myself and learn all about them! People, can you see now what is at stake here? If no one else can, Vega Dreary certainly does. The moment I hear the door slam shut behind Nora, the door through which she breaks out of her home, I sense that the curtain is rising on a great drama in which I myself have been selected to play a part.

I was ignorant and conceited, I knew nothing of the real state of affairs, but I found myself fired by the same inspiration that ran through the world of women in those years, driving the suffragettes into battle, impelling high-born ladies to throw stones through shop windows and pour acid through letterboxes, to climb into ministerial cars and

shout their 'Votes for women, Mr Asquith' into the face of a statesman fearing for his life. I was totally unaware that such things were going on in the world; perhaps I did not even know that the women of my own country had recently, before the women of all other countries, been gifted the right to vote. I had never heard of the existence of that venerable institution the Finnish Women's Association*, still less dwelt on its mission to promote the intellectual prowess of women and improve their economic and civic status. All those small sewing circles* in Limingo, Suojärvi, Kangasala, Finby and Pargas, in the most remote rural areas and the largest towns in all corners of our land, were working away entirely without my knowledge, sewing and dabbling and organising their little projects to support poor mothers and children, provide work for destitute women, maintain children's homes, workhouses, weaving schools and libraries. If I had known anything about them, I would have despised them from the bottom of my heart, those sewing circles. I knew nothing of the women in my country who worked in quarries, copper mines or brickworks, in match factories, sawmills, at wood grinders or paper works, in spinning mills, bakeries, flour mills and tobacco factories, who supported themselves by cooking, lacemaking, sewing, taking in laundry, ironing, copying work, bookbinding or as stevedores. If I had known them, too, and seen their bent backs, their tired, worn hands, I would not have had any idea that these were the women, the least legally protected and most scorned of them all, who by their hard, underpaid work, their double labour, in society and in the home, had laid the foundations for women's freedom and made it possible for a few Noras to open their front doors and say: I am first and foremost a human being!

I had no understanding of what was really going on and did not see the wider context or realise the extent of the revolution that was taking place, sometimes silently and covertly, sometimes with shouts and banners and hallelujahs, and least of all did I realise that labour, the secret freedom of labour, was at the core of this revolution as of all others. But I did grasp one thing, all the same, instinctively sensing

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this to be an appeal, an exhortation to march, a battle fanfare. I was familiar with the spirit speaking through Nora's lines, recognising it as my own *fighting spirit*. This united me with all those of whom I knew nothing, my sisters, my scattered and irresolute legionaries the world over.