

**INTERIM**

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Interim by Dorothy M. Richardson

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**DOROTHY M. RICHARDSON**

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# INTERIM

## CHAPTER I

MIRIAM thumped her Gladstone bag down on to the doorstep. Stout boots hurried along the tiled passage and the door opened on Florrie in her outdoor clothes smiling brilliantly from under the wide brim of a heavily trimmed hat. Grace in a large straight green dress appeared beside her from the open dining-room door. Miriam finished her cadenza with the door knocker while Florrie bent to secure her bag saying on a choke of laughter, *come in*. You've just been out, said Miriam listening to Grace's soothing reproaches for her lateness. Shall I come in or shall I burst into tears and sit down on the doorstep? Florrie laughed aloud, standing with the bag. Bring her *in* scolded Mrs. Philps from the dining-room door. Grace took her by the arm and drew her along the passage. I'm one

mass of mud.—Never mind the mud, come in out of the rain, scolded Mrs. Philps backing towards the fire, you must be worn out. —No, I don't feel tired now I'm here, oh what a heavenly fire. Miriam heard the front door shut with a shallow suburban slam and got herself round the supper table to stand with Mrs. Philps on the hearthrug and smile into the fire. Mrs. Philps patted her arm and cheek. Is the door really shut O'Hara said Miriam turning to Florrie coming into the room. Of course it is, choked Florrie coming to the hearthrug to pat her; — I'll put the chain up if you like.—Sit down and rest before you go upstairs said Mrs. Philps propelling her gently backwards into the largest of the velvet armchairs. Its back sloped away from her; the large square cushion bulging out the lower half of the long woollen antimacassar prevented her from getting comfortably into the chair. She sat on the summit of the spring and said it was not cold. Wouldn't you like to come up before supper suggested Grace in answer to her uneasy gazing into the fire. Well I feel rather grubby. Give her some hot water murmured Mrs. Philps taking up the Daily Telegraph. Grace preceded her up the little staircase carrying her bag. Will

you have your milk hot or cold Miriam? called Florrie from below—Oh, hot I think please, I shan't be a *second* said Miriam into the spare room, hoping to be left. Grace turned up the gas. M-m darling she murmured with timid gentle kisses, I'm so glad you have come. So am I. It's glorious to be safely here . . . . I shan't be a second. I'll come down as I am and appear radiant to-morrow — You're *always* radiant — I'm simply grubby ; I've worn this blouse all the week ; *oh* bliss, hot water. Sit on the rocking chair while I ablute ; unpack my bag — D'you mind if I don't Miriam darling? Aunt and I called on the Unwins to-day and I haven't put my hat by yet. We've got three clear days—All right, oh my dear you don't know how glad I am I'm here — Grace came back murmuring from the door to repeat the gentle kisses. When the door was shut the freshness and quietude of the room enfolded Miriam, smoothing away grubbiness and fatigue. Opening her Gladstone bag she threw on to the bed her new cream nun's veiling blouse and lace tie, her brushbag and sponge-bag and shoes and a volume of Schiller and a bundle of note-paper and envelopes. A night-gown was put ready for her on the bed frilled in an old-



fashioned way with hand-made embroidery. Her bag went under the bed for nearly four days. Nothing grubby anywhere. No grubbiness for four days. In the large square mirror her dingy blouse and tie looked quite bright under the gas-light screened by the frosted globe. Her hair had been flattened by her hat becomingly over the broad top of her head, and its mass pushed down in a loose careless bundle with good chance curves reaching low on to her neck. She poured the hot water into one of the large cream-coloured basins, her eye running round the broad gilt-edged band ornamenting its rim over the gleaming marble cover of the washstand, the gleaming tiles facing her beyond the rim of the basin, the highly polished woodwork above the tiles. She snuffed freshness everywhere. While the fresh unscented curdiness of the familiar Broom soap went over her face and wrists and hands she began to hunger for the clean supper, for the fresh night in the freshness of the large square bed, for the clean solid leisurely breakfast. Pushing back her hair she sponged the day from her face sousing luxuriously in the large basin and listening to Grace moving slowly about upstairs. Seizing a towel she ran up the little single flight and stood

towelling inside Grace's door. Hullo pink-face, laughed Grace tenderly, smoothing tissue paper into a large hat box—I say it must be an enormous one—It is; it's huge smiled Grace—You must show it to me to-morrow—Miriam ran downstairs and back to the mirror in her room to look at her clean untroubled face. Don't run about the house, come down to supper, called Florrie from below.

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Have they brought the sausages, asked Mrs. Philips acidly.

Yes, scowled Florrie.

Don't forget to tell Christine how we like them done, said Grace frowning anxiously. Miriam took her eyes from the protruding eyes of the Shakespeare on the wall opposite, and shut away within her her sharp sense of the many things ranged below him on the mantelpiece behind Florrie, the landscape on one side of him, the picture of Queen Victoria leaning on a walking stick between two Hindu servants, receiving an address, on the other side, the Satsuma vases and bowls on the sideboard behind Mrs. Philips, the little sharp bow of narrow curtain-screened

windows behind Grace, the clean gleam on everything.

*Christine?*

Oh yes, didn't you know? She's been with us a month —

What became of Amelia?

Oh we had to let her go. She got fat and lazy.

They all do! they're all the same—Go on Miriam.

— Well, said Miriam from the midst of her second helping — they both listened, and the steps came shambling up their stairs — and they heard the man collapse with a groan against their door. They waited and, well, all at once the man, well, they heard him being violently *ill*—Oh *Miriam*—Yes; wasn't it awful? and then a feeble voice like a chant—a-a-a-ah-oo—oo-oo-oo kom, and hailpeme — *Ob* Meester Bell, kom, oh, I am *freezing* to death, *what* a pity what a pity— and then silence. She fed rapidly, holding them all silently eager for her voice again to fill out the spaces of their room — For about half an hour they heard him break out, every few minutes, *ob* Meester Bell, dear pretty Mr. Bell kom. I am *freezing* to death whatta pity — whattapity.