

*1902*

I shall be beautiful. I shall be beautiful and clever and good, and everybody will admire me and love me.

The fourteen-year-old girl stared at her image in the mirror and wondered how long she'd have to wait for the beauty. Not, she told herself, that this was any more important than the other qualities. It was just that it was easier to recognize. And so far there wasn't that much of it to identify.

The eyes, yes, the eyes were good. But the complexion was decidedly swarthy, the forehead a little too low, and the mouth and chin were perhaps just a trifle too determined. A touch less firmness, that's what was needed, she decided. Not enough feminine softness.

Well, I'm not quite grown up yet. It will come.

And then she thought of her sister Laia, two years younger, and quite startlingly beautiful already. So beautiful that men followed this twelve-year-old in the street. If there was a lovesick swain to be seen loitering outside their house, it was Laia he was hoping to see, of that you could be certain.

Elvira sighed. She found Laia's beauty disturbing. Try as she would, she couldn't help feeling jealous. And she didn't like the feeling. Above all she didn't like to think of herself as being jealous. Jealousy was a mean, nasty emotion, and she felt diminished by it. Besides, had she not decided, once and for all, that she was going to be good – as well as beautiful and clever?

And where was the goodness in grudging poor Laia her loveliness?

She'll never be as clever as I am, that's for certain. Can I not be content with that? I ought to; and I would, if it weren't equally true that I'll never be as beautiful as she is.

'Get away from that mirror, you vain creature! You'd be better employed helping me with the ironing.' Elvira's mother spoke with a touch of amusement in her voice, and this hurt the girl more than a severe rebuke would have done. She had been caught apparently indulging in a little human frailty. Angry at her mother for having caught her out, and at herself for allowing the situation to arise, she flounced out of her bedroom and into the laundry.

Trust Mother to get it wrong. As if I'd been admiring myself! When it was precisely all that's *wrong* with my face that I was examining. Yet I suppose that's a sort of vanity too, a sort of cheated vanity. If I were as lovely as Laia I expect I'd be staring in the mirror all day. And yet she doesn't. So perhaps there's more goodness as well as more loveliness in her.

Elvira's sense of justice forced her to admit that this preoccupation with becoming beautiful was on exactly the same level, morally, as the satisfaction of the vain little puss who spends hours admiring her image in the mirror. She sighed. What about all her aspirations after goodness, then? She comforted herself with the reflection that, if she did grow into the loveliness she longed for, she would make a point of forgetting all about her looks, and concentrate on being good.

Meanwhile . . .

Meanwhile here was this pile of ironing. All the men's shirts, starched and resistant, and a mass of white petticoats with cascades of lace, nightdresses and blouses with lace and ruching and frills and tiny pleats that had to be ironed absolutely flat, each pleat facing the same way. Mother, of course, had done all the

table linen. Said it had to be absolutely perfect, that was why she never left it to Elvira, whose work she considered rather slapdash. Elvira felt sure she could make just as good a job of the tablecloths and napkins as her mother did – nothing but rectangles, after all. That left all the difficult things like shirts and blouses for Elvira. And, if the table linen had to be absolutely perfect, what about Father's shirts? Her brothers, too, were just as fussy but less fearsome. They had less power, though they still had the God-given authority of the Spanish male, so they too had to be respected.

Elvira picked up one of the irons from the hot coals and spat on it, to see how hot it was. All she got was a rather faint sizzling sound.

'Piedad!' she called, 'Piedad!' And when the maid came Elvira scolded her for letting the fire get too low.

Elvira started on her own nightdresses, knowing no-one was going to worry if they weren't perfect. There was no point in tackling the shirts or blouses with a cool iron.

She let her mind wander as she worked, giving little attention to her task just yet.

In the year nineteen hundred and two here we are, still slaving away exactly the same as before. I was so sure everything would change, when the new century began.

And here we are, two years later, still wasting our time over frills and flounces, when there's so much to be done, so much to learn, so many books to read. And Francesc and Dalmau, who haven't got half my brains, are being encouraged – no, forced – to struggle through all the books I'd love to read, just because they're the boys, and girls don't count. All the nuns expect us to learn is how to sew and embroider, how to play a few simple tunes on the piano and stutter out a few words in French, and how to write a really good

copperplate hand. As for our reading – lives of the saints, and that’s it.

The iron was getting too cool to make even a moderately good job. Elvira took it over to the fire, which was now burning quite brightly, placed it on the glowing coals, and picked up the other one, which responded with a furious sizzle to her spitting test. She wiped it on a rag and brought it down on one of her sister’s blouses. But she hadn’t wiped carefully enough, and a black smudge appeared on one of the sleeves.

Elvira gazed at it with a dismay that gradually turned to anger. She’d been so careful, and yet . . .

She took the blouse over to the sink and with some difficulty washed out the smudge. The starch, of course, had been washed out too in the process. Strictly speaking she ought to starch the sleeve again. But this was a slow and bothersome business, and Elvira grudged the time she would have to spend on it.

Well, it’s Laia’s blouse, she won’t mind. Now, if it had been one of Father’s shirts – or even one of the boys’ . . . So I’ve been lucky after all.

As she worked she tried to estimate the degrees of good and bad luck in the little incident. She *had* remembered to wipe the iron, so it *was* unlucky that the smudge had appeared. Then she had to admit that it wouldn’t have happened if she had wiped the iron properly. So perhaps it wasn’t a matter of bad luck after all, just inattention on her part.

Elvira prided herself on both her capacity to examine a situation and to accept responsibility for her failures. She attributed the first of these virtues to her intelligence, and the second to her moral integrity. The way she had analysed the incident of the smudge convinced her that she had scored well on both the intelligence and the goodness fronts. It never occurred to her that

the self-satisfaction this reflection afforded her ought perhaps to be counted as a minus on the goodness scale.

Elvira knew that she was considered rather too serious for a girl. It wouldn't help her get a husband, she was constantly being told. And Elvira would toss her head and say she didn't care. But she did care; for she knew that any woman who didn't marry was considered an out-and-out failure, and this was the last thing she wanted to be. So marriage was very much on her agenda, but only as a necessary step in the direction of the sort of person she hoped to become. For she wanted to be someone who made things happen, someone who made a difference.

Later that afternoon Elvira and Laia set off to visit a friend. As they passed in front of one of the churches they saw a beggar sitting on the steps. He cried out to them in a pathetic voice.

'That's the sort of society we live in,' remarked Elvira. 'People begging in the streets, and no-one cares.'

'I care,' said Laia. And she crossed over to where the beggar sat whining and gave him a handful of coppers.

'Where did you get that money?' Elvira asked.

'It's some change I got this morning when I went to the shop for some shirt buttons.'

'A fat lot of good that will do. We've got to change more than that before we can begin to call this country civilized. And you think you've solved the problem with a few coppers!'

For once Laia answered back:

'Well, at least I gave something. All you do is make a fuss and do nothing.'

'And all *you* do is give a few coppers – and they're not even yours – and then you forget all about it.'

'Besides,' and Laia burst out laughing, 'what about the time you yourself did the same thing? Don't you remember getting hold of Mother's purse and giving all the contents to a beggar?'

‘You can’t possibly remember that. You were only three at the time.’

‘I know. But Mother has told us about it often enough.’

‘Well, I was only five years old. All you’ve done by reminding me of the episode is confess that you’re behaving like a five-year-old.’

‘Not exactly. I showed a sense of proportion. I only gave away a few coppers. And anyway, what else can one do?’

Elvira answered firmly:

‘*Change* things. That’s what has to be done.’

‘But how?’

‘I don’t know yet. And even if I knew, I couldn’t do it.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s a question of power.’

‘We have no power. Even when we’re grown-up we won’t have any,’ observed Laia placidly. ‘Women don’t.’

Two young men passed by, their eyes riveted to Laia. Elvira noticed and reflected that her sister would never be short of one particular type of power. What a weapon! she thought. But Laia won’t do a thing with it, not even try to use it. Just enjoy the attention she gets, purring like a satisfied kitten.

It seemed unfair. She, Elvira, would use that kind of power, if she had it, to reform the world. Meanwhile, there were no signs of the approach of the beauty that would confer this power on her. She did at least take some comfort from the knowledge that there was one man whose admiration for her was unbounded, who even seemed to prefer her to her sister.