

SISTERS

BY ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

She came as so many others like her had come, for advice and moral support. I had met her at meetings. she looked very unhappy. She said, "I have come to you because I have nowhere to go, I have been without a roof over my head for three weeks now. I have no money and nothing to live on. Give me some work. Otherwise the only place for me is the street".

I said, "But I thought you worked. I thought you had a job".

She said, "I did have work. But I fell ill over three months ago. My baby fell ill. I had to give up work. My baby died. I could not get my job back".

I asked, "Have you separated from your husband? Why have you nowhere to go?"

"I walked out on him. And I would do anything rather than go back to him." She could not hold back the tears. "Forgive me", she said, "This is the first time I have cried. I couldn't before but when someone offers sympathy its hard to stay dry eyed. I'll tell you my story then you will understand.

She had met her husband while they were both fighting for a new world. Both believed that their dreams would come true. That they would win a better life for all people. They were real comrades fighting side by side. She became pregnant. They were married. She did not stay home for long. They put the child in a creche. They both worked outside the home.

When she was chosen to go to a conference, he was proud of her. She joked, "You won't make a scene when you get a cold supper, will you? He said, "what does it matter. Its love that mustn't be served up cold". They laughed



This is a true story. It was written in the 1920's. Alexandra Kollontai worked among women workers in Russia. This was when workers were fighting the rulers and the bosses for their rights. Kollontai became Minister of Social Welfare. In this story Kollontai

writes about a woman who came to her for help.

together. It seemed nothing could destroy their feelings for each other. They were not just husband and wife. They were comrades. They faced life hand in hand. They shared the same dreams. Their little girl grew up healthy. But then all this changed. How had it happened? The trouble seemed to start when he got a job in the company.

The company meant good pay. He said she should leave her job. But her work was important to her. At first things were fine. They moved to a bigger flat. He was off travelling for the company for three months. When he got back she sensed it was a stranger who had returned. He didn't listen to her. He hardly looked her way. He began to dress smartly and use scent. He was hardly at home for even five minutes. And he started drinking. She tried to talk to him. But he was silent.

The drinking became worse. She was very worried. She wondered whether he had stopped loving her.

At her work they were reducing the staff. She

was worried she would lose her job. And at the same time her baby became sick. Her husband was never there to share her troubles. She said, "I was sitting one night with my sick child when the bell rang. I went to open the door. I was pleased my husband had come. I hoped he was sober so that I could share my worries with him. I opened the door. At first I could not understand. A young woman was with him. 'Let me in,' my husband said, 'I've brought along a girlfriend. We are going to enjoy ourselves and don't you interfere.'

He was so drunk he could hardly stand up straight. I let him in and hurried to my child. I locked the door. I sat trembling. I did not even feel angry. I felt hurt. I could hear everything in the next room. I would have like to sit with my hands over my ears, but I had my sick baby to care for.

The next evening he came home earlier than usual from work. My heart was heavy. I reached for my coat. I decided I must leave. He caught my arm roughly. He grabbed my coat and began to shout at me. He said I would never find a husband as good as him. He talked on and on. I could see he was suffering. I still loved him. I began to comfort him. We made it up.

And things got even more difficult. My little girl was often sick. He hardly even looked at her. She died. He didn't even come to the funeral. I lost my job. I spent my time getting involved in the organisation in my area. I found something useful to do. I could see he no longer loved me. But I hoped the bad times would pass and he would love me again.

I hoped until something happened that made me leave him. I came home one evening after a meeting. I was making tea. I heard the door open. There was a parcel that had come for him so I picked it up and went to give it to him. And like the last time I didn't understand at first. A tall slender woman was standing next to my husband. I saw he was sober and this made it worse. The woman looked

embarrassed. I put the parcel on the table, told him it was urgent and left the room.

As soon as I was alone I began to shake all over. I was afraid I would hear them so I lay with the blanket over my head. Now I had to realise he did not love me. Not even as a comrade or a sister. If he cared for me as a friend he would have been more thoughtful and not have brought his woman to our home. I felt such hatred towards that woman. I didn't sleep. Everything was quiet. And then I heard steps. The kitchen door was opened. I knew it was the girl. She didn't come back. I got out of bed and went into the kitchen.

She was sitting by the window, hunched up and crying her heart out. "Forgive me", she said, "I didn't know he wasn't living alone. I'm very upset about everything". This surprised me. I began to think she must be his friend, not a prostitute. I asked if she loved him. She looked surprised. She said, "We met for the first time yesterday. He promised to pay me well. Its the same to me as long as they pay well". She started to tell me her story. She had lost her job. Had no roof over her head. She had gone onto the street. She now had food, clothes and could send her mother money, she was still young. Only 19.



I listened to her and I began to feel sorry for the girl. I realised that if I had no husband I would be in exactly the same position as her. I now hated my husband. How could he take advantage of a woman's misfortunes? And he is supposed to be politically conscious and a responsible worker. Instead of helping a comrade he buys her. He buys her body for his own pleasure. I decided I could not stay and live with a man who acted like that. We talked for a long time. I made some coffee. But suddenly she was in a hurry to be gone. I asked if she got paid. She said she would not take the money.

I got dressed to see her on her way. I wanted her to take my last wage packet. All feeling for my husband died. And I am now walking around without money, work or a place to go. And I ask myself will I have to go on the streets like the girl?"

Here was a woman trying to be independent and trying to fight the old way of life. She went, but her look of hopelessness haunted me. It demanded an answer, it demanded action. It demanded struggle.



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