THINGS A BRIGHT GIRL CAN DO

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To all my babysitters, without whom this book would have been even later than it actually was.

February 1914

Reforms can always wait a little longer,
but freedom, directly you discover you haven't
got it, will not wait another minute.

Unfinished Adventure, Evelyn Sharp

Strange Happenings Outside a Playhouse

'You tell me that women are weak-willed! You tell me that women are weak-spirited, and foolish, and ignorant, and only fit to stay at home and raise the children.' The woman on the orange crate paused, then added, 'Hardly seems fair on the children, does it?'

There was laughter from the crowd. Evelyn, always fascinated by the Suffragettes, said, 'Hold up a minute, can't you?' to Teddy, who stopped at once.

A man in the crowd called, 'A woman's sphere is the home! Do you contest it?'

'Her *sphere*, yes. Not her *prison*. You may as well say a man's sphere is the office, and take his vote as well.'

More laughter. This time, Evelyn joined in.

'Oh, come!' It was an older, rather apoplectic-looking gentleman. 'A woman doesn't need a vote! Her husband votes for her, and if she's not happy with his choice, she has a hundred ways to make him change his mind. *That's* a woman's proper influence, not the ballot box.'

'Indeed?' The Suffragette was enjoying this. You could

tell. 'It's rather hard on the unmarried woman or the widow though, isn't it? And the husband.' More laughter. 'I'm not sure your idea of proper influence is very complimentary to either sex.'

A young woman in a fur coat was pushing her way past Evelyn.

'Ooh!' she said, to the man beside her. 'I do think these women are perfectly horrid. As if any *lady* would want to stand on a nasty box and shout things at delivery boys.'

Evelyn bristled. She opened her mouth, but Teddy put his hand on her arm.

'Cool it,' he said. Then, before Evelyn could argue, he nodded at the Suffragette on the orange crate. 'She's doing rather well, isn't she?'

'I think she's splendid,' said Evelyn.

'Isn't she, though?' It was another Suffragette, one of the ones who were standing at the edge of the crowd, passing out handbills. This one looked about twelve, although Evelyn supposed she must be older. She had long, loose fair hair under her tam o'shanter, and a wide, toothy smile.

'Would you like a handbill? We've a meeting at the Albert Hall next week; you must come along if you're interested. There's more about it in *Votes for Women*, only that's a penny.'

'All right,' said Evelyn, fumbling for her purse. The woman on the orange crate was lecturing her audience on the iniquity of British divorce laws. Evelyn took her copy of *Votes for Women* and scowled at the front page.

'Look here,' she said suddenly to the girl. 'You Suffragettes think girls should be able to do all the things men can, don't

you? Live in flats on their own, and get degrees, and – oh, everything. Don't you?'

'Lord!' said Teddy, audibly.

'Oh yes,' the girl said. 'But the vote is the first step. Those things will follow once we get the vote, and heaps of other things too – state orphanages, and old-age pensions – why!' Her little white face flushed. 'Once women have the vote, we'll never go to war, you know. What sort of woman would send her sons off to be slaughtered?'

'You,' said Teddy, 'have obviously never met my Aunt Gwladys. Evelyn, Mother and Father will be wondering where—'

Behind them, there was an outraged roar from the crowd. Evelyn turned. The Suffragette on the orange crate was clutching her cheek, her mouth open in shock. As Evelyn watched, another missile was flung at her; she ducked and it missed. A boot-black and a man selling hot chestnuts at the edge of the crowd whooped appreciatively.

The apoplectic gentleman called, 'I say, steady on! Mind the lady, can't you?!'

The chestnut-seller pulled an awful face. 'Go on!' He yelled at the woman on the orange crate. 'If you was *my* wife, I'd take a stick to you!'

'Evelyn,' said Teddy. 'I'm frightfully sorry, but we're going to have to look slippy if we want to catch Mother and Father. We'll miss the first act at this rate.'

'I know,' said Evelyn. But she didn't move.

'Why don't you stay at home where you belong?' the chestnut-seller roared. He picked up a handful of chestnuts,

cooling on the side of his brazier, and flung them at the Suffragette's eyes. She ducked again, but did not step down from the crate.

'Evelyn—' said Teddy.

'Cheese it, can't you, Jimmy Boon!' It was another woman, standing in the doorway of the shop behind them. 'Some of us are trying to listen to the lady!'

'You can cheese it and all, you daft cow!' the chestnut-seller yelled. He pulled back his arm and flung a final chestnut in her direction.

It hit Evelyn square on the jaw.

She liked to say, later, that was the moment when she made up her mind.