THE LECTURE: A STORY: BY PAULA JAKOBI

IMOUSINES and more limousines.
Why is the street blocked with limousines—this street full of men’s clubs?
Is the perpetual candidate breakfasting at the Harvard Club?
Is the President of the Borough of Manhattan receiving the Street Cleaning Department from the City Club?
Or are the Immortals holding a convention at the New Century Club?
No. The limousines which block the street are filled with women.
It is early. Only ten o’clock in the morning and the women surge from their cars. They are besieging the entrance to a great theater.
Oh, for the days of the scalper. Is it too late?
There is no one at the window of the box-office.
Alone, the stranger hurries to secure a ticket for the play.
Just a frivolous ticket for a play.
Why is there so great a crowd standing about the closed doors?
Is there a censored play to be produced for the élite?
Or can it be a meeting of fashionable pickets?
No, it is only a lecture.

Then why do they push so about the closed doors?
Is the lecture not announced for an hour later?
It is extraordinary. Why do they push so?
Women. Groups of women, crowds of women, throngs of women.
Creatures with delicate tastes. Pushing, crowding, elbowing.
And perfumed. Jicky, sandal, orris and musk, après l’ondé.
And voices. Voices nasal, coarse voices and many high pitched.
Furs. Sable, fox—blue and silver, baby lamb.
Seal, more sable. And pearls.
Chatelaine bags of cut steel and of gold.
Women. Groups of women, crowds of women, throngs of women.
To hear a lecture!

In huge semi-circle they press around closed doors.
The kind lady at the door beseeches them not to push, not to hurry.
In soothing tones she tells them there are seats for all.
Furthermore that it is not ladylike to push.
But if pushed ahead then shove the offender back.
A door is open. Bing!

A football scrimmage is nothing to it.
Into the darkened theater they rush.
THE LECTURE: A STORY

They do not look it, but they are strong—these doughty Amazons of the morning!
Elbows and heels serve them in good stead.
And yet no rich furs are torn, no pearls wrested from delicate necks.
No one is killed in the shuffle.

They sit shoulder to shoulder.
The sleek, well fed, well groomed, well brushed, well powdered.
One woman with punctual husband, adoring children, perfectly trained servants, well ordered home.
She is asking herself: “Why did I come this morning?
Is not my home complete? Why go beyond it?”

And the pretty, plump, soft-eyed, well dressed daughter of the house with her well dressed chum.
They giggle and whisper low in the darkened theater.
No one can imagine what they whisper and giggle about.

And the old, old woman with carefully arranged massaged face and carefully adjusted marcelled wig.
With priceless jewels playing like castanettes on shrivelled fingers.
With a thousand hidden pangs of age.
Morbidly introspective she asks herself:
“Why cannot I buy a cessation of time’s whirl?
Why cannot I set the wheels in the opposite direction?
If only hope and expectation and warmth of life could be mine!
Instead of cold isolation. Isolation through fatigue, sickness, ugliness, death!
But I must escape myself. The lecture will help me to forget.”

And next, one who looks as discreet as her sisters, perhaps more discreet.
There is nothing bizarre in her attire.
Who would know that she is ostracized from society?
Then what draws her here?
Only a desire to get in touch with things as they were long ago.
To sit next to the kind that were her kind then.
To get away from scents and sounds grown hideously distasteful.
To hear words with another meaning than the language spoken around her.
This language so different it is almost foreign to her.
The young woman with heart throbbing fast, big with child, big with hope.
THE LECTURE

Listening to the message of things achieved.
The painting of the splendor of life, of worlds to conquer and make real worlds!
Her heart beats faster at the thought of the life within her and the richness and the promise.
How she will foster and protect it and give it the beautiful world and the larger life—

The woman who is earnestly seeking, earnestly striving,
Looking in every direction to try to help straighten out the chaos.
The chaos of tangled lives, of wretchedness and inequality.
She burns to see things righted.
But there is so much to be righted that she does nothing but dream how to reform the world.

The fashionable milliner who never misses one of these lectures.
For here she can see the styles and know what is most becoming.
She is sorry when the lecture is over, for there are many styles.
She is repaid by the end of the hour.

Occasionally there is a simply clad woman intervening.
One with deep eyes and earnest brow.
One who looks as though she would listen and understand.
One who would learn this lesson of communal life.

Is this a lecture only for women?
No. A bold or curious man or one interested in City Planning
Makes his conspicuous way through the feminine crowd.

The theater grows light. The speaker is on the platform.

The lecture is over. There is applause. Then animated conversation.
The well fed, well groomed woman looks for her pretty, plump daughter with indulgent smile.
The girl's eyes are moist. "A great lecture," she whispers to her mother.
"Yes, but if we don't hurry we'll be late for our table at Mailard's."
The old, old woman wonders whether getting up so early in the morning is worth the exertion.
Some seated nearest the speaker are hushed.
They are so rapt in thought they do not realize that it is over.
A STORY

The house is darkened.
Broodingly they leave the theater.
Many, happy as schoolgirls freed from compulsory tasks, talk volubly.
There are little staccato ejaculations.
"Will you walk up the avenue with me?"
"No, I haven’t time. I must go to my dressmaker."
"Sorry I can’t go. I’m due at the Belgian Relief."
"I go to a Suffrage luncheon."
"Oh, do you? And I’m off for the Labor Temple to address a meeting of the Strikers."
"Life is interesting these days, but it certainly is one grand rush!"
"It’s well enough to hear about the municipally owned street car, but give me a lecture on Tchekoff or Andreef. Those Russians get under the skin."
"Hasn’t he a wonderful vocabulary?"
"Yes, but did you notice his smile?"
"Did you see Mrs. Mendes? I wonder who makes her clothes?"
"Say, Flossie, I got here late. What did he say?"
"I really didn’t understand exactly, but I was tremendously moved."
"Are you going to buy his book?"
"Mercy, no. I haven’t time for reading. I have to attend a lecture of some kind every morning."

Furs, sandal, satin and pearls.
Out of the theater into the waiting limousines.
The last car moves away. The street is cleared.
The stranger thinks sympathetically of the poor, tired lecturer facing this crowd of idle, emotional women.
"How he must long for an audience of men!
How sick he must be of us women!"

The lecturer enters the lobby eagerly, as if he were seeking someone.
Is he looking for a man, a peer, an equal?

A fair, fragile little woman goes toward him.
"At last," he murmurs. They gaze into each other’s eyes.
He takes her arm in his.
They walk off self absorbed and happy.
They do not see the stranger.
They are oblivious to the world.