

The Visit From Nellie McClung

I got to Humanities class just as the bell rang and was met by Jason and his posse of bullying boys. “Give me that!” Jason ordered. He ripped a book out of my hands, threw it on the ground, and stomped on it. The other boys laughed as the bell rang. I stood, red-faced, then took my seat.

After attendance, Mrs. Wolfer mentioned the school election. “Remember, everyone should vote, either today or tomorrow.”

Filing into the voting line, I tried to ensure I was not near the bullies. Unfortunately, they lined up behind me. “Why are you in this line, Laura?” asked Wesley.

“Yeah. Girls can’t vote. Their opinions don’t matter,” Jason chuckled nastily.

“They DO matter!” I retorted. I was about to blow.

“Nope. Girls are stupid and dumb. Especially you, Laura!” yelled Jason.

Then it happened. I’m not usually bothered by things they say, but this time, I was. I burst into tears and ran. By the time I realized what I was doing, I was at my house. When I told my mum what happened, tears rushed down my cheeks again. She understood. She always understands me.

That night, my dreams were so vivid, they seemed real. Nellie McClung was in my bedroom. She sat slowly rocking back and forth. “Come, child,” she said soothingly. I got out of bed and sat on the grey area rug. She began talking about her life. As she described it, I could clearly picture it in my mind.

“My family and I had just moved in 1911. I wasn’t much for staying home and keeping house all day, so I joined the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. We discussed why women should vote, and men shouldn’t. We thought men shouldn’t vote because they were likely to get drunk or gamble, while women were more reserved and less likely to do those things. I brought together a group of five women: Emily Murphy, Louise McKinnley, Henrietta Edwards, Irene Parlby, and myself.”

“What did you do?” I inquired.

“We protested and showed people why women should be allowed to vote. In 1914, members of the Political Equality Group held a mock Parliament. In 1916, Manitoba granted women the right to vote. Other provinces quickly followed. Tomorrow, child, share this story with those boys at school. Tell them, girls and boys are equal.”

The next day, I wondered whether it was real, or a dream. I was excited for Humanities class. When it began, Mrs. Wolfer called me to her desk. “Why did you run out of class yesterday, Laura? If you couldn’t decide who to vote for, you could have waited until today.”

“But you see, Mrs. Wolfer,” I began, “that’s not what happened. Your son and his friends told me I was stupid, and girls shouldn’t vote because their opinions don’t matter. Their bullying usually doesn’t bother me, but this time it did. But I’m all better now.”

“I didn’t know my son and his friends bullied you. I’m going to have a chat with them. Now you go vote!”

For once in my life, I wasn’t afraid when I saw the bullies. They walked up to me and said, “Don’t you remember what we said yesterday? You shouldn’t be voting!”

“Yes, I should!” I said. When I told them everything I had learned from Nellie McClung, they were in disbelief. I could tell they thought I was delusional, but just then Mrs. Wolfer called the boys to her classroom. When I entered the voting room, I saw them coming out of Mrs. Wolfer’s room. Their faces were red, probably because they didn’t expect me to tell on them. I smiled proudly when I entered the voting booth and marked an X beside my chosen candidate’s name. I was happy that I had the courage to speak out against the boys, and I was grateful for what Nellie McClung had done.