

Emily's Story

"You seem really happy tonight Emily", remarked one of Emily Davison's friends, that evening when they met at the social function for the Women's Political and Social Union. "I heard you are going to the Derby tomorrow....."

"Yes. Wait until you see the newspapers the day after tomorrow!", Emily replied.

"Why?"

Emily chose not to reply, but there was a twinkle in her eye and the hint of a smile.

"What are you going to do Emily?", her friend asked, but she got no reply.

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When Emily got home that evening to the small flat she shared with a friend, she went to her room and sat and looked at herself in the mirror. "What am I really doing tomorrow?", she thought to herself. "I'm going to make the establishment sit up and take notice", she answered herself. She thought again about the plan she had devised and a small shiver went down her spine, when she considered just how dangerous it was. Did she really have the courage to do it?

It didn't take Emily long to answer that question either. Hadn't she been to prison numerous times for the cause of women's rights? Hadn't she had to endure the indignity of being force-fed, the feel of that hideous rubber pipe being jammed down her throat, whilst a prison orderly poured that sickly soup-like substance down it? Hadn't she thrown herself down ten hard cold stairs while in prison, in protest at the force-feeding of herself and her fellow suffragettes? Yes, she would have enough courage tomorrow.

Then a small smile flickered across Emily's face as she recalled the night of the census 2 years earlier, when she had hid in a cupboard in the House of Commons, so that she could legitimately register her address that night as 'the House of Commons'. Yes, she knew she would have the courage to do what she planned the next day. But it would be dangerous.

Slowly Emily took off her dress. She remembered the bad old days when it had been required of her that her body be forced to fit the artificial S-curve of the dresses, with the terribly tight corsets which emphasised the breast and hips and made the waistline as small as possible. Thank goodness, Emily thought that Poiret had brought out the corset-free high waist dress in 1906. It was at least one step forward for women. But there was so much more to do.

Emily slept fitfully that night.

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She was still up early on Derby Day morning. Emily got dressed quickly and after a short breakfast, found an appropriate hat and, with her friend Mary Richardson, made her way to the local railway station. When she got there, she made a beeline to the ticket office. The station was busier than usual that morning, with plenty of other passengers heading in the same direction. After a short wait, Emily found herself in front of the window of the ticket office.

“A return ticket to Epsom, please”, Emily said to the clerk behind the glass.

“Certainly madam. There you are”, the clerk replied handing a ticket over to Emily in return for the money Emily gave him. Mary bought a return ticket as well.

Emily and Mary then made her way to the platform for trains to the south and after a short wait the train came into view. They waited patiently for their turn to get on and managed to find spare seats. After a few more stops, the train was getting quite full, with so many passengers on their way to the Derby and Emily and Mary were glad of seats. Emily took some time to think carefully about what she would be doing once she got to Epsom. She also thought about the much-needed holiday she had planned for a few days later. Emily had written a postcard about the proposed holiday to her sister Laetitia, who lived in France and to whom she was very close, and as the countryside south of London passed by, Emily wondered if she had received it yet.

The scene at Epsom station was chaotic. It seemed to Emily and Mary that there were people everywhere. It was noisy and busy, but they soon found her way out to the road up to the racecourse. They had not been before, but with such a large crowd going, it wasn't difficult for Emily and Mary to find their way to the course. When they got there they were met by another busy scene; never before had they been in such a huge crowd. Emily felt excited, as she considered how important an event the Derby was and how her actions that day would bring such great publicity to the cause of Women's Suffrage. Still before then there were other things to do. She was there on serious business, but she still thought she might as well put some money on horses in the other races. Hopefully it would be her lucky day....

But Emily hadn't forgotten why she was really there. As the minutes ticked away and as the less important races started and then finished, so she got ready for the moment, when the cause of the Suffragettes would get all the publicity it could need. Soon it was time for the Derby to begin and Emily, with Mary alongside her, made her way to the front of the crowd and stood behind the white railings at Tattenham Corner. She held a small green, white and violet flag in her hands; green for the letter 'g' in Give, white for the letter 'w' in Women and violet for the letter 'v' in Votes. However, Emily wasn't just there to wave it as the horses sped past.

Soon the horses were being lined up ready for the start of the race. They snorted and tossed their proud heads as they were cajoled into line for the start. Then a minute before the race started Emily raised a paper before her eyes, almost as if to hide herself in some way. Mary saw that Emily's hand was as steady as a rock. It did not shake. Even when Emily could hear the pounding of the horses' hoofs moving closer she was still smiling.

As the horses approached Tattenham Corner, so Emily quickly ducked under the railings and made her way out onto the racetrack. The horses were charging down the course at a deadly speed, their hooves churning up the course, as if they were children leaving footprints in newly fallen snow. They were bunched up against the same white rails Emily had just ducked under and escaped from. Emily by this time stood some distance from the railings nearer the middle of the course. The horses were going so fast that the leading group of five horses sped past Emily in the wink of an eye. But there were still more to come.

Emily shouted "Votes for women", as two more approached. On one of the horses, Emily could see that the jockey, Herbert Jones, was wearing the King's colours. Very calmly and deliberately, Emily walked in front of Anmer and held up the green, white and violet flag, as if to pin it to the horse. However, the horse was galloping far too fast and Anmer caught Emily on her shoulders and knocked her violently to the ground. The horse and the jockey both fell to the ground as well.

Immediately Herbert Jones, the jockey, did what he was trained to do in such circumstances. He lay where he was. Suddenly more horses came around Tattenham Corner and Jones feared that one of them would hit him, but they sped on and Jones was untouched by their heavy hooves. After the last horse had passed him, stretcher bearers ran onto the course and gently lifted Jones onto a stretcher and took him to the ambulance room at the back of the main grandstand. There Jones was inspected and found to have a broken rib, bruised face and slight concussion. Anmer meanwhile had got to its feet and completed the course without Jones. But what of Emily?

Many of the spectators who had witnessed the event were angry with her. They shouted and cursed; indeed there was more sympathy for the horse than there was for Emily.

"Stupid woman! What did she want to do that for?"

"She's just about spoilt my day! I hope the horse and jockey are alright...."

But Emily didn't hear. She lay motionless in the middle of the course, unconscious and oblivious to the chaos, as a crowd, including her good friend Mary, swarmed around her.

Stretcher bearers came for Emily too. She lay there bleeding profusely, streams of warm red blood oozing from her slight figure, like gentle, sad waterfalls in the heat of summer. The stretcher bearers fought their way through the crowds and carefully lifted Emily's body onto the stretcher. They felt for a pulse and found one, but her body was as limp as a rag doll. The lioness of Suffragism was then rushed away to the local hospital in Epsom.

Immediately after she arrived at the hospital, Emily was inspected by a doctor.

"How is she?", the doctor was asked.

"She is in a bad way, I'm afraid. There is still a pulse, but it is weak. I fear that her heart has been badly damaged by the impact of the horse. There is also a lot of internal bleeding and she is showing no signs of regaining consciousness."

Word of the tragic accident soon spread and, as Emily had predicted, the newspapers were full of the story of how she had been knocked down in the middle of the Epsom Derby, one of the great social occasions of the year. It was more publicity for the Suffragette Cause. Deeply concerned, many of Emily's friends from the Suffragette movement came to visit her. They all hoped and prayed that Emily would suddenly sit up and say hello, while perhaps wondering what all the fuss was. The doctors at Epsom, realising just how serious Emily's injuries were, even called in Mansell Moulin, a consultant surgeon at London hospital to help them.

But it was all to be in vain. Four days after the accident, Emily passed away, on 8th June 1913. A huge funeral was held in London the very next day, and the day after, Emily's body was taken by train to its final resting place in the family plot in the churchyard of St Mary the Virgin in Morpeth,

Northumberland. There were large crowds lining the streets of the pretty Northumberland market town as the funeral cortege slowly wound its way from the station to the church.

There was one final service in the old stone-built church, with its reassuring tower at its east end. Then the body was taken out to the family plot, where it was laid to rest among the trees and the flowers and the other graves. Her body lies there still, finally at peace after such a tempestuous life.

The year after Emily's death, Britain became embroiled in the First World War and the issue of Women's Suffrage was not a priority as the country rallied round the flag and the cause of defeating Germany. However, with so many young men away at the front, many of the jobs which they had previously done, had to be done by women and they soon proved Emily and the other Suffragettes right by showing that they could do many of the jobs previously thought to be only done by men. When the war ended in November, those who opposed women's suffrage found that they had run out of excuses. Finally they had to extend the vote to the half of the British population who had been denied it. Even then it wasn't done fairly and until 1928 only women over 30 could vote, while all men could vote at the age of 21. Finally, however, 15 years after Emily's violent death at the Epsom Derby in June 1913, women got the vote on the same basis as men.

The only sad thing was that, of course, Emily wasn't around to see it all happen. There surely wouldn't have been a person in the whole of Britain, who would have enjoyed voting more than Emily Davison.

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