

THE LINE

A Story

Bluebell Stewart Phillips

LONDON, a quiet suburb in the year 1870.

Elder Johnson sat at his desk, drumming his fingers against its smooth surface with mounting hysteria. He rose precipitately and let the heavy white drapes fall across the window with a vigorous tug, but he could not shut out the sight of his heavy underwear billowing in the wind, bloated and full as he would be in another ten or fifteen years, and Heather's pink night-gown whipped to a thin line indecently twining and untwining around it. Revulsion tore at him, nauseating him.

He used to love the study—he could remember a day when he had thrilled to the sight of Heather's dainty lingerie dancing beside his on the clothesline; now, the very thought was unbearable.

"Ready for a cup of tea, dearest?" Heather asked, entering the room.

He regarded her smooth, fair hair and blue eyes with distaste.

"I'll have it in here," he answered brusquely and her pale skin flushed painfully.

"Not with me? I used the new dishes—everything looks so pretty."

"Sorry—I'm busy. I've an important case coming up and must work on it." He sat down abruptly, pulled papers toward him.

Heather moved toward him and the soft rustle of her silk gown increased his irritation.

"Aren't you rather dressed-up for an afternoon at home," he suggested indicating the high pompadour and ringlets, the elaborate velvet bustle on her dress, with a disdainful sweep of his hand.

Her eyes filled with tears and she stopped uncertainly.

"I thought you liked me to look nice," she answered gently.

"There is a difference between looking nice, as you call it, and the unnecessary adorning of the flesh." And before she could do more than catch her breath. "Please leave me now, Heather. I'm really busy."

She turned toward the door.

"I'll bring in your tea, dear."

Elder waited until she had left the room. Then he rose and with a determined closing of his lips unlocked the drawer containing his private papers, and took from it a small photograph which he thrust into the inside pocket of his suit coat. He was able to bear Heather's return, fortified by that other face against his breast.

"There you are, pet. Doesn't it look good?" His wife ran a tender hand across his crisp hair and he shuddered involuntarily.

"It looks very tasty. And now my dear I really must get to work." He rose and pushed her, restraining his urgency gently from the room.

"Oh El," Heather sighed. He doubled his fists at his side but answered quietly enough as he closed the door.

"I *mustn't* be disturbed."

He stood there, listening to the tap-tap of her high heels as she walked down the hall. Then he went to his desk, pushed the tray from him, and took the photo from his pocket.

The face that looked out at him was the antitheses of Heather's; dark eyes were luminous under a smooth cap of brown hair that set off the fine featured face to advantage; a plain white collar was crossed modestly at the base of a smooth white throat. Elder's regard sought the woman's neat mouth—there was a touch of austerity in its delicate contours, in the almost imperceptible lines reaching from it to the fine, straight nose. So different from Heather's full, bowed lips and slightly tip-tilted nose.

"Deborah—my sweet Deborah," he said, and it seemed to him the mouth curved in a gentle mocking smile. It had been a gentle, hurt smile he had seen that February night when he had told her.

"I'm sorry, Deborah—I'm going to marry Heather Lowe—the Madison's niece—the one from Brighton—," he was stumbling in his embarrassment. "You and I—we weren't meant for each other."

"No? Well, perhaps not Elder. But she—" and Deborah's voice broke, "she isn't of our faith, is she Elder. Why don't you wait a little."

"I can't—I love her—we're going to be married tomorrow."

The dark eyes had darkened, but Deborah's voice had remained steady.

"Then I hope you'll be happy. Though I don't think you will be. Wait, Elder."

Wait! How could he wait with Heather inflaming his blood, Heather who moved, Cleopatra-like, swinging her slim hips; her high, pointed breasts twin daggers slashing away the restraints of a life-time.

II

FOR a few months marriage had been wonderful. Heather was gay, charming, lively—desirable and desiring. She made Elder forget his staid, puritanical

background; she laughed at him, cajoled him, teased him. Her lovely face blotted out the stern features of his mother frowning upon a sinful world; her gay fashionable dresses sheathing the beautiful, willing body hid the severe garments his mother wore as an indication of her sinful state and as a protection against the weaknesses of the flesh; her lilting, soft voice drowned the critical tones of the woman who had drummed hell-fire into his head and heart; her tender "El" made him forget that he had been named Elder because he was destined to support the church and be a pillar of righteousness.

Until one night as he lay beside Heather his mother's shadow seemed to come between the sleeping girl and the palely illuminated window, and he heard the familiar voice speak the familiar words.

"Beware the lusts of the flesh my son. The flames of hell reach for sinful man. Moments of pleasure will never dull the pain inflicted by an eternity of punishment, of burning in the pit—"

He knew it to be an illusion, but he could not rid himself amid the hungry flames, and as he looked at his sleeping wife his love for her seemed to shrivel as though it had been scorched in the flames of his remorse.

"My God, my God," he moaned softly, turning from her, "I will no longer yield to the flesh. Forgive me—forgive me." And when Heather turned and put her white arms sleepily across him, he shuddered, and daylight only strengthened his guilt.

She could not understand why he avoided her. He pleaded business, fatigue, but she pursued him.

"Are you mad at me, El?"

"No—no."

"Then, what's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing." Impatiently.

"I'm busy—I'm tired." And at last, "I'm going to sleep in the guest-room."

"Oh El!"

"I don't want to disturb you." Stubbornly. "I sleep badly."

"But you don't disturb me, dear," coming close to him so her perfume teased him, so her soft body aggravated him. "Don't you love me any more, El?"

He did not answer and she cried, "What have I done? Please tell me—"

Her nearness, the blue eyes swimming with tears, the warm mouth tremulous, betrayed him into putting a hand against the firm smooth arm. He swung her around to face him but his mother's forbidding countenance moved like a mask upon his wife's face so he pushed her away and rushed upstairs to his room.

Heather was sitting stiffly on the hall seat when he came down the stairs a few moments later, carrying his club-bag. Her hands were like white lilies against the deep scarlet of her velvet gown, and no whiter than the transparent paleness of her face.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice quivering.

"Home—to my mother's, I mean."

"Just like this—tonight—for no good reason."

"I think my reasons are good—they satisfy me."

He did not take a hansom. The fog was thick and closed in behind him like a heavy wall shutting him off from the small, pleasant house he had called home for a few months, from the entangling arms that would draw him to perdition. He walked quickly, his stern face set, his long legs moving along the familiar London streets almost of their own volition.

III

HIS mother was pleased to see him. "I knew you couldn't be happy with her. She is too much of this world. It was never a marriage." And a little while later. "It is Tuesday evening."

"Yes, Mother?"

"Tuesday."

"Then Deborah will be here shortly." And at his mother's slow agreement, "I want to see Deborah. I've thought about her a great deal."

His mother's stern features relaxed slightly and a faint flush tinged her cheeks.

"Deborah's a fine woman; her way of life is ours."

Certainly Heather's wasn't Elder thought later, as he sat in the small dark parlour drinking weak tea and listening

to the thin conversation of Deborah and his mother. Were he home—this is home, he reminded himself, this is what I want. Deborah had greeted him as though they had been parted for only a few hours; her hands had been slim and cool in his.

"I'm glad to see you, Elder," she said and her eyes added, "I knew you'd come back."

"I'm glad to see you too," he answered both her words and her eyes, "and—I should have waited, as you told me to."

"Mistakes can be corrected—this one, at least," she said. "Sit down, Elder," as though this were her house and not his mother's. He sat down, feeling suddenly alien, and with an unwelcome memory of Heather's white arms about his neck, her long silver hair soft and caressing along his arms around her as she greeted him on his return home from the office.

"This is what I want," he assured himself, aloud.

"Deborah, would you like to go for a walk—we have a great deal to talk about, you and I."

It was good to walk through the still October night, along the quiet street with the whole of London between him and Heather; to walk calmly beside a quiet woman, his blood coursing smoothly; it was good to talk of his soul and his hope of heaven.

"You will redeem yourself. God must forgive you if you repent. Even the saints have been tempted and fallen. Set your face toward the ultimate good."

"I will, I will Deborah."

"And I'll help you, Elder. We'll return to our old companionship."

"I've torn her out of my heart, Deborah. It's only my weak flesh that suffers." Elder brushed the vision of Heather aside with an impatient hand. "And when I am with her—I loathe her. Perhaps—perhaps I should have stayed with her and completed my freedom."

"No!" Deborah interrupted sharply. "No—you were right to leave her. She represents evil. Prayer will save you. "Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways."

Elder grasped her hand.

"You are my guardian angel, Deborah."

"Let us return to your mother's. We have prayers before I leave. We have wrestled, like Jacob, with the Lord to save your soul."

"Thank you, Deborah," he answered feeling peace flood over him.

He went to bed that night, to his own narrow white bed in the spotless, barren room that his mother had kept ready for him, and he slept without dreaming.

"I'll send Heather money today," he told his mother as they sat at breakfast. "That, I think, is only just."

"Yes, my son. You are both just and honourable. She is very worldly and no doubt the money is what she likes best."

For a moment Elder had a confused sense of being enveloped by laughter and clinging arms and soft fragrant hair, but he shook his head and looked into the dark stern face before him and the mirage disappeared.

"No doubt, Mother. Well, I must be off."

He bowed his head over his empty plate and listened to the words he knew so well, words of petition and of blessing that flowed from his mother's lips, justifying and ennobling his actions.

He wrote a note to Heather and sent her a thick wad of bank-notes by his clerk.

And that was to be that.

The days went by: there was a soothing influence in their very monotony—grey days tempered the brilliance of the past months; the stark simplicity of his mother's house superimposed itself upon the remembered coziness of his house and Heather's, and made the latter somehow crass and objectionable; the restraint and modesty in Deborah made Heather, in retrospect, seem vulgar and uncouth.

Then Heather returned his bank-notes.

They had been carefully smoothed out, but had obviously been crumpled into a small, tight, angry ball. Elder had a painful vision of Heather's warm hand crumpling it and throwing it violently into a corner while she flung herself onto the nearest piece of furniture, to cry. There was such abandon in her infrequent spasms of grief! At the vision the quiet structure of weeks was swept away and his mind and body trembled with the agonizing

desire for Heather—for her gayety and warmth, for her round soft body and eager lips.

Angrily he called a cab and drove to the home he had left. The blinds were drawn and the house looked empty and deserted. There was no response to his impatient pull at the bell; he could hear the soft, lonely tinkle through the heavy door—but nothing else. At last he used the key he still kept on his chain, and went in. All Heather's things were gone, and the house seemed desolate.

He went to his mother's.

IV

WHERE could she have gone? And what is she using for money?" he asked, pushing aside the lunch his mother had prepared.

"My son—why search for evil? The Lord has answered our prayers and sent her from you that you never be tempted again. Remember Lot's wife and turn not back."

"I am *not* turning back, Mother. It's only that—"

"You see, my son—you had freed yourself of her—she has chosen this method to enslave you again. Be not deceived."

Elder looked into the sunken, commanding eyes, and did not answer.

"Her name is Delilah." His mother put her hand on his arm, urgently. "With soft looks and a soft body she has wooed you from the heavenly way."

Elder bowed his head on his hands and shuddered; fragrance burned his nostrils.

"I'm lost—I'm lost. And yet—is it so evil to love? You and father—"

"Ours was a holy union, my son, not an abandonment to the flesh. Yours and Deborah's would have been a blessed union."

"She still bears my name." Elder raised haggard eyes to his mother's. "I cannot have her in want."

"Then have her found—see that she is forced to accept money from you—but-do-not-see-her-again."

He found her; he walked into Eldridge's to buy a pair of gloves, a few days before Christmas, and there she was selling gloves

and hosiery. Elder stood a distance off, his mind whirling with the maze of emotions that shattered all his hard-earned composure. He would have gone to her but he felt a hand on his arm and looked down into Deborah's quiet face—a face more youthful but equally as stern as his mother's he almost thought.

"How did you know where I was?"

"I knew where *she* was."

"She looks ill."

"She looks worldly. Brooches, earrings, fashionable dress."

"Heather always liked to look nice."

"Nice! A neat modesty of attire, yes. She is gowned to lure men. Look at her—fluttering her eyelashes, pouting! Come home, Elder."

He went with her, but Heather went before him all the way. Her red lips and pointed breasts, her soft silver hair and blue eyes. She was lovelier than ever with the shadow of sorrows on her face. He went home, but he was tormented by his unruly flesh. His mother and Deborah prayed with him until they were all exhausted, and still the bright face of his wife beckoned him; he could smell the fumes of the pit, and see the flames but his mind pursued Heather beyond both.

"We'll attend the meeting tonight, my son," his mother said at last, "you and Deborah and I. We'll exorcise this evil spirit among us. The Reverend Brother Hemsley is preaching—you remember him?"

"Yes—yes. I remember him." It was the Reverend Brother Hemsley who had first filled his boyish mind with the horrors attendant upon any yielding to the flesh. He could save him, if anyone could,

Gratefully, with Deborah and his mother, Elder went to the meeting and sat through the hymns and witnessing; then the Reverend Hemsley rose, walked to the preaching desk where his tall, cadaverous form seemed to grow more cadaverous and ominous. He leaned across the pulpit, fixed his dark, restless eyes upon Elder and spoke in a deep, harsh voice.

"If thine eye offend thee—pluck it out!"

What else he said Elder did not know: the words rang in his ears like an enormous bell: so magnificent were they. So simple.

If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out. His hand sought Deborah's and pressed it gently: she smiled at him fleetingly but encouragingly. He turned to his mother: her eyes were closed but her face was raised to the preacher's as to the sun and she paid no heed when Elder rose and moved past her. He knew, now, how to solve his problem, and he could not wait. Impervious to the rush of fiery words filling the small, bare chapel, wrapping themselves like tiny sharp whips about the silent, anguished congregation, Elder left the building.

V

WHEN Heather saw Elder standing at the foot of the stairs in her boarding-house she stopped with one hand on the banister and the other at her throat.

"Hello, Heather," he said, and could not control the excitement in his voice.

"El?"

He put out a hand pleadingly.

"Heather."

"Have you come back, El?" She wore a lacy blue robe he had bought for her shortly after their marriage, and her fair hair hung loose about her shoulders. He could see the quick rise and fall of her smooth breasts through the filmy material and his eyes widened fanatically.

"I love you, Heather."

The light he knew so well burst across her face and she flew down the stairs and flung her arms about him.

"Oh El—El. I knew you'd come back. I've prayed you'd come back."

For a moment he held her close, dizzied by her soft body and the sweet, clean smell of her. He said in a shaken voice, "You're thin."

"I just wore away with loneliness," she said, the tears welling into her eyes. "I'll get fat—fat as butter, now you're back."

He closed his lips in a severe line as his mother did hers.

"Put on your coat—we're going out."

"No, darling, let's stay here. I'm so tired—I'm always tired it seems."

"You wouldn't take my money," Elder chided.

"Not without your love," she answered seriously. "I couldn't ever take money from you if you didn't love me."

"If *you* love me put on your coat and a scarf—we haven't much time."

She gave him a bright smile. "I'll change into a gown and some warmer shoes—I won't be a minute."

"Come just as you are—you don't need to change."

"But Elder, they say this is the coldest night we've had for over ten years! I don't want to catch a cold—not now."

"I came in a cab."

She ran upstairs to return in a moment wearing her coat and silk head-shawl. As they went out a bitter wind rushed at them from the street carrying snow and bits of stinging ice. Heather shivered and drew back, but Elder pulled her arm through his and she tucked her hand into his pocket and snuggled against him for protection.

The street lamps were almost obscured by the swirling snow.

"I can't see the cab—my feet are cold already dear."

Elder walked quickly without answering. The tall, dark houses loomed like an impregnable army, side by side, interminably, along the street.

"Where's the cab? I can't go much farther. My feet feel frozen," Heather pleaded, holding back.

He grasped the arm he held, more firmly, rushing her down the street, into the stinging blast.

"Where are we going, El?" she cried, struggling to free her arm. "Where's the cab? My feet—oh, my feet."

"We're not going far."

Her teeth chattered and she began to kick her toes against the snowy pavement as he dragged her along with him.

"El—I'm afraid my feet are truly freezing. Couldn't we beg for shelter in one of these houses for a moment?"

"No."

She began to cry.

"Where are we going?" The dark night closed around them tighter and tighter, like strong wool thread darning them together in a small cold space.

"Where are we going?" she cried again.

"We're going to heaven," he answered sternly. "If thine eye offend thee—you are my eye."

"I don't know what you mean," Heather cried through chattering teeth. "I'm going into one of these houses and get warn."

He grabbed her to him, crushing her face against the icy coldness of his rough coat.

"No, Heather. No. Don't you see—this is the only way I can keep you. Stay with me Heather. My wife, my darling."

"I'm cold, El."

"I know;" A street lamp glimmered faintly through the storm as they stood strangely desolate in the lonely city street. Heather looked up into her husband's eyes. Elder gripped her by the arms and his eyes were deep and wild. His regard held hers for a long, still minute, and he moved his hands in a meaningful gesture toward her throat. "We'll walk."

With a strangled sob she raised her head and walked beside him, but he felt her stumble and took her arm again.

"This has to be, Heather. I love you. This is our salvation." She was a leaden weight against him, and he dragged her unresisting form exultingly. At last he said, "We'll go home now." She did not answer and he lifted her frail body into his arms and bore it back to her boarding house triumphantly.

VI

WITH eager, sure fingers he undid her clothes and tumbled her into bed; her beautiful limbs were white and stiff below the knees, mottled red and purple above them.

"Now I can adore you, Heather: now you will no longer tempt my flesh: our true spirits can meet in hallowed love." He piled blankets over her and she moaned. "We'll be so happy—so very happy," he said. "You'll see—I'll devote my whole life to you." He bent to kiss the disordered fair hair. "We'll be happy," he repeated.

Easter and the long warm summer came and went before Elder brought Heather back to their home—brought her in his

arms and placed her in the enormous, padded chair from which she would never be free. And his face shone with joy. Tenderness melted the stern lines of his face, the fanatic burning of his eye, as he bent over her in the study where he had brought her.

"I love you more than I ever did," he said, anxiously. "Does that make you happy?"

Heather looked out the window, across the gardens bright with crimson maple trees, across lawns strewn with red and yellow and brown leaves.

"I want to walk on the leaves and hear them crackle," she said slowly.

"I love you—don't you understand—I'm free to love you now." His voice was urgent.

"You haven't suffered pain—terrible, killing pain," she said slowly, laboriously. "I can stand pain. But I can't bear never being able to walk again."

"I've suffered," Elder cried. "I've suffered the torments of the damned."

She smiled, not at him but into space.

"It'll happen any time. Any time at all. You know that, or don't you?"

"What'll happen?"

"My heart will stop. One minute I may be talking—like now—and the next I may just stop."

"You're crazy. It isn't true."

"I'm not crazy," she said, stressing the pronoun, speaking gently. "I came home only because the doctor said it would happen any time. There's scarcely a thin line between me and death."

"The doctor didn't tell me," Elder cried hysterically.

"Didn't he? Maybe he thought you'd worry," Heather said softly. "Your mother will be glad, and Deborah." She put her head back against the chair and two tears trembled on her eyelashes. "I would have liked to walk through the leaves again."

"I'll carry you—you don't need legs. Love and a pure conscience are more important than legs." He dropped to his knees beside her. "Pray with me, Heather. Be thankful I've saved your soul." He shook her arms vehemently and her head dropped forward with a disjointed, lolling motion.

After what seemed like an eternity Elder stood up quietly. Outside his study window the empty clothesline swung briskly in the September wind. His fingers went to his collar and he swallowed with difficulty.

"If thine eye offend thee," he said to the silent figure beside him. "If thine eye offend thee—"

The line whipped taut and then slack. Elder opened the window.

Work Unlimited

It is a false assumption that there is just a fixed amount of work to be done. There could be no greater fallacy. There is no limit to the amount of work to be done as long as any human need or wish, that work could fill, remains unsatisfied.

HENRY HASLITT.