

# The Coterie

by Jeanette Y. Holst

*English, Soph.*



MIRIAM parked her bicycle, pausing to adjust her skirt, which had slipped sideways. She wadded her hair into a bun, jamming the loosened pins back into place. Her face was streaming from the long hot ride along the flats to the Adams place. She wanted desperately to look presentable this time, because Sylvia, Mrs. Adams' daughter had asked her to take greater care with her appearance, in case there should be guests from the University.

Miriam rarely had an opportunity to see the artistic clique of friends who surrounded Sylvia Adams, since she was consigned to kitchen work the last few times she had worked at the house. Yet, she had caught glimpses of them, when Mrs. Adams had asked her to serve cocktails before dinner. As she passed among them, she tried to absorb as much of the conversation as possible, delighting in the display of verbal dexterity, and the endless bits of critical acumen that seemed to flow so effortlessly, as they discussed various artists. Much of it passed quite over her head, but Miriam tried to memorize the names of authors, their works, and the opinions voiced concerning each one, with a religious zeal.

Sylvia Adams, who seemed to dominate the group, parti-

cularly intrigued her. She could hear Sylvia's voice all the way out in the kitchen, as it rose above the others to praise or damn their comments. "Dresler, you're a complete ass!" she would say. "To be as kind as humanly possible, the *most* one could say is that Fitzgerald used Zelda's affliction to turn out second-rate fiction." Or she would say, "My God, how droll! But of course Williams can get just the right touch in his characterization of women. He empathizes in the most intimate terms. He *is* Karen Stone in *Roman Spring*. Her Paolo is one of his "boys". Consider *Streetcar*. Scratch the surface of Blanche DuBois—Voilà!—Williams, sharpening his claws. Of *course* he knows a woman's mind. He *is* one!" And the others would laugh appreciatively in unison.

Perhaps today she would see them again, and be able to talk to them. Perhaps she would miraculously find herself in their midst, and be drawn into the charmed circle. And she would tell them that she, too, was an artist, that they were kindred souls, and that she belonged to them. And they would ask her what she thought of such-and-such a novel, and she would reply, "I think it's very fine," in tasteful understatement, the way Sylvia responded when she liked something very much.

When Miriam knocked at the door, Mrs. Adams showed her in, smiling broadly. "Miriam," she said, "I'm happy you could come." She turned to her daughter. "You remember our little Miriam, don't you, Sylvia?"

Sylvia looked up from her book. "Of course," she replied, peering over the rims of her glasses. Miriam's eyes were drawn to the small knife Sylvia held poised in mid-air. The intricately carved handle with its slender blade, catching the sunlight, stirred ambivalent reactions of aesthetic joy and raw fear. Sylvia slid back in her chair, placed the knife on her open book, and stared at the girl. "Mother tells me you're planning to go to the University," she said. "What is your field, dear?"

"I want to learn to write," Miriam said in a shy voice.

"Ah, journalism," Sylvia said. "So you can submit pieces

to the "Ladies Home Journal" concerning the crisis in the kitchen, and the inner turmoil of the benighted hausfrau."

Miriam lowered her eyes. "I want to become an artist," she said. "A real aficion for Art," Sylvia smirked, raising an eyebrow. "So you'll be in Literature. Who is your favorite contemporary?"

Miriam's mind refused to function. Contemporary—what does that mean, she thought—what does that mean? She struggled to think of a reply to cover all possibilities. She swallowed hard. "Well, that's hard to say," she said finally.

"No doubt Hemingway," Sylvia offered. "So many of you young people try to emulate his style."

"Yes, Hemingway," Miriam agreed, relieved and shaken.

"And what do you think is his magnum opus?" Sylvia perisisted.

"Enough," Mrs. Adams said suddenly. "Now you two musn't spend the morning chatting. There's work to be done. I'll want you in the library today, Miriam."

Miriam followed her liberator blindly, smarting with self-contempt. She glanced back at Sylvia, who was severing the uncut pages of a literary journal, running her tiny knife along the edges of the page with crisp movements. Sylvia's face was immobile. There was nothing in that bland expression to indicate enmity of any kind. Miriam thought she must have imagined a climate of hostility.

When they reached the library, Mrs. Adams guided Miriam through the door. "Just a little dusting in here today," she said. "All the shelves on this side." She let her hand drop on Miriam's shoulder, and gave her an affectionate pat. "Don't mind Sylvia," she said with embarrassment. "She means well."

After Mrs. Adams had left, Miriam began to remove the books from the shelves. She handled them tenderly, flipping through pages of print, drawing in the fine odors of ink and paper. She felt a strange attraction toward these volumes, sensing that the mastery of their content could bridge the chasm between herself and people like Sylvia Adams. The

desk dictionary captured her attention. She opened the great book, ruffling the pages hurriedly. Contaminate—contemplate—contemporary— She mouthed the words silently. In her preoccupation she did not notice that the door had opened, and that someone was standing behind her.

“Miriam,” Sylvia said with a faint smile. “Are you amusing yourself?”

“I’m putting the books back,” Miriam started, slamming the dictionary shut, and gathering an armload of volumes from the desk.

“Here, let *me* put them back,” Sylvia said. “Some of these are rare editions.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to grab them up like that.” Miriam said in a dismal voice.

“I’ll be wanting this one,” Sylvia said, unearthing Sartre’s *Existential Psychoanalysis* from the pile. “Your Hemingway is an existentialist, you know. No matter how he may protest.”

“I know,” Miriam said in a sick voice.

“Are you familiar with Sartre’s work?”

“Yes,” Miriam lied.

“His fundamental project is comparable to Hemingway’s Oedipal drive. You know—the primordial urge to conquer the subject-object dichotomy, and become one’s own father. Don’t you agree?” Sylvia asked.

“But that’s silly,” Miriam blurted out, before she could stop herself. “Nobody could become his own father!”

Sylvia collapsed in laughter. “My dear,” she gasped, “you’re priceless, just priceless!” She swept out of the library, leaving her victim alone in the great room.

Miriam fought the desire to lunge after her, to tear her flesh to bits, and leave her mark of fury on that smirking face.

After a few moments Miriam slipped into the hall, freezing as the sound of muffled laughter echoed along the corridor, coming from the direction of the drawing room. There were two voices now, two sharp stilettos.

“You wouldn’t believe it!” The voice, unmistakably Sylvia’s wildly struggled for control, whinnying and gasp-

ing. "It's *too* rare! It's just *too* rare!"

"God!" the male voice roared. "Innocence incarnate—Turgenev's Akulina made flesh!" Their laughter died, only to be revived again.

Miriam crept noiselessly through the hall to the foyer. Sylvia's knife lay on the desk, emitting a strange repelling glare. She grabbed it up, cutting her hand in her haste. She watched in fascination as the blood formed on the heel of her hand. A single scarlet drop fell on Sylvia's book. Miriam laid the knife on the open page, and backed away, her hands behind her back. She broke into a run, when she saw Sylvia and a smartly dressed young man enter the hallway.

"Come back!" Sylvia cried. "You're to lunch with us. Thomas wants to meet you, and I'm inviting some friends from the University."

"I can't," Miriam mumbled, as she struggled with the door.

Mrs. Adams seemed to appear from nowhere. She darted a glance at Sylvia, and then searched the faces of the other two. "What's this?" she asked. "You can't be leaving, Miriam."

"I've invited her to stay for lunch," Sylvia said. "And she says she can't."

"Well, of course you can, my dear," Mrs. Adams insisted. "You *must* stay! I wouldn't think of letting you go without meeting Thomas. He's just had a story accepted by one of those small literary magazines. And he's gaining a fine reputation for his work—he really is! Now you must stay and have a nice long talk with him. I'm sure you two will have a great deal in common. Miriam wants to become a writer too," she said to Thomas with enthusiasm.

Thomas turned to Miriam, smiling and bowing with flourish. "I salute my competition," he said, "the world's next Gertrude Stein."

"Now, I'm counting on you to take her under your wing," Mrs. Adams said with a bright smile. She put her arm around Miriam's shoulder, and drew her back into the room.