DODD LEE WILSON

THE BOOK OF SUSAN: A NOVEL

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Dodd L.

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Содержание

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THE FIRST CHAPTER

I

IT happens that I twice saw Susan's mother, one of those soiled rags of humanity used by careless husbands for wiping their boots; but Susan does not remember her. John Stuart Mill studied Greek at three, and there is a Russian author who recalls being weaned as the first of his many bitter experiences. Either Susan's mental life did not waken so early or the record has faded. She remembers only the consolate husband, her father; remembers him only too well. The backs of his square, angry-looking hands were covered with an unpleasant growth of reddish bristles; his nostrils were hairy, too, and seemed formed by Nature solely for the purpose of snorting with wrath. It must not be held against Susan that she never loved her father; he was not created to inspire the softer emotions. Nor am I altogether certain just why he was created at all.

Nevertheless, Robert Blake was in his soberer hours – say, from Tuesdays to Fridays – an expert mechanic, thoroughly conversant with the interior lack of economy of most makes of automobiles. He had charge of the repair department of the Eureka Garage, New Haven, where my not-too-robust touring car of those primitive days spent, during the spring of 1907, many weeks of interesting and expensive invalidism. I forget how many major operations it underwent.

It was not at the Eureka Garage, however, that I first met Bob Blake. Nine years before I there found him again, I had defended him in court – as it happens, successfully – on a charge of assault with intent to kill. That was almost my first case, and not far – thank heaven – from my last. Bob's defense, I remember, was assigned to me by a judge who had once borrowed fifty dollars from my father, which he never repaid; at least, not in cash. There are more convenient methods. True, my father was no longer living at the time I was appointed to defend Bob; but that is a detail.

Susan was then four years old. I can't say I recall her, if I even laid eyes on her. But Mrs. Bob appeared as a witness, at my request – it was all but her final appearance, poor woman; she died of an embolism within a week – and I remember she told the court that a kinder husband and father than Bob had never existed. I remember, too, that the court pursed its lips and the gentlemen of the jury grinned approvingly, for Mrs. Bob could not easily conceal something very like the remains of a purple eye, which she attributed to hearing a suspicious noise one night down cellar, a sort of squeaking noise, and to falling over the cat on her tour of investigation – with various circumstantial *minutiæ* of no present importance.

The important thing is, that Bob went scot-free and was as nearly grateful as his temperament permitted. His assault – with an umbrella stand – had been upon a fellow reveller of no proved worth to the community, and perhaps this may have influenced the jury's unexpected verdict.

Of Susan herself my first impression was gained at the Eureka Garage. Bob Blake, just then, was lying beneath my car, near which I hovered listening to his voluble but stereotyped profanity. He had lost the nut from a bolt, and, unduly constricted, sought it vainly, while his tongue followed the line of least resistance. I was marveling at the energy of his wrath and the poverty of his imagination, when I became aware of a small being beside me, in plaid calico. She had eager black eyes – terrier's eyes – in a white, whimsical little face. One very long and very thin black pigtail dangled over her left shoulder and down across her flat chest to her waist, where it was tied with a shoe string and ended

lankly, without even the semblance of a curl. In her right hand she bore a full dinner pail, and with her left thumb she pointed toward the surging darkness beneath my car.

"Say, mister, please," said the small being, "if I was to put this down, would you mind telling him his dinner's come?"

"Not a bit," I responded. "Are you Bob's youngster?"

"I'm Susan Blake," she answered; and very softly placed the dinner pail on the step of the car.

"Why don't you wait and see your father?" I suggested. "He'll come up for air in a minute."

"That's why I'm going now," said Susan.

Whereupon she gave a single half skip – the very ghost of a skip – then walked demurely from me and out through the great door.

II

Bob Blake, in those days, lived in a somewhat dilapidated four-room house, off toward the wrong end of Birch Street. His family arrangements were peculiar. He had never married again; but not very long after his wife's death a dull-eyed, rather mussy young woman, with a fondness for rouge pots, had taken up her abode with him – to the scandal and fascination of the neighborhood. It was an outrage, of course! With a child in the house, too! Something ought to be done about it!

Yet, oddly enough, nothing that much worried Bob ever was done about it, reckoning the various shocked-and-grieved forms of conversation as nothing. As he never tired of asserting, Bob didn't give a damn for the cackle of a lot of hens. He guessed he knew his way about; and so did Pearl. Let the damned hens cackle their heads off; he was satisfied!

And so, eventually, I am forced to believe, were the hens. In the earlier days of the scandal there was much clitter-clatter of having the law on him, serving papers, and the like; but, as hen cackle sometimes will, it came to precisely naught. Nor am I certain that, as the years passed, the neighborhood did not grow a little proud of its one crimson patch of wickedness; I am reasonably certain, indeed, that more than one drab life took on a little borrowed flush of excitement from its proximity.

Of course no decent, God-fearing woman would ever greet either Bob or Pearl; but every time one passed either of them without a nod or a "How's things to-day?" it gave one something to talk about, at home, or over any amicable fence.

As for the men, they too were forbidden to speak; but men, most of them, are unruly creatures if at large. You can't trust them safely five minutes beyond the sound of your voice.

There was even one man, old Heinze, proprietor of the Birch Street grocery store, who now and then cautiously put forth a revolutionary sentiment.

"Dey lifs alvays togedder – like man unt vife – nod? Vere iss der diffurunz, Mrs. Shay?"

"Shame on you for *them* words, Mr. Heinze!"

"*Aber*" – with a slow, wide smile – "vere iss der diffurunz, Mrs. Shay? I leaf id to you?"

That Pearl and Bob lived always together cannot be denied, and perhaps they also lived as some men and their lawful wives are accustomed to live – off toward the wrong end of city streets; and occasionally, no doubt, toward the right end of them as well. Midweek, things wore along dully enough, but over Sunday came drink and ructions. Susan says she has never been able to understand why Sunday happens to be called a day of rest. The day of arrest, she was once guilty of naming it.

Bob's neighbors, I fear, were not half so scandalized by his week-end drunkenness as by what Mrs. Perkins – three doors nearer the right end of Birch Street – invariably called his "brazen immorality." Intoxication was not a rare vice in that miscellaneous block or two of factory operatives. Nor can it be said that immorality, in the sense of Mrs. Perkins, was so much rare as it was nervously concealed. The unique quality of Bob's sin lay in its brazen element; that was what stamped him peculiarly as a social outlaw.

Bob accepted this position, if sober, with a grim disregard. He had a bitter, lowering nature at best, and when not profane was taciturn. As for Pearl, social outlawry may be said to have been her native element. She had a hazy mind in a lazy body, and liked better than most things just to sit in a rocking-chair and polish her finger nails, as distinguished from cleaning them. Only the guiltless member of this family group really suffered from its low social estate, but she suffered acutely. Little Susan could not abide being a social outlaw.

True, she was not always included in the general condemnation of her family by the grown-ups; but the children were ruthless. They pointed fingers, and there was much conscious giggling behind her back; while some of the daintier little girls – the very little girls whom Susan particularly longed to chum with – had been forbidden to play with "that child," and were not at all averse to telling her

so, flatly, with tiny chins in air and a devastating expression of rectitude on their smug little faces. At such times Susan would fight back impending cataracts, stick her own freckled nose toward the firmament, and even, I regret to say, if persistently harassed, thrust forth a rigid pink tongue. This, Susan has since informed me, is the embryonic state of "swearing like anything."

The little boys, on the whole, were better. They often said cruel things, but Susan felt that they said them in a quite different spirit from their instinctively snobbish and Grundyish sisters – said them merely by way of bravado, or just for the fun of seeing whether or not she would cry. And then they often let her join in their games, and on those happy occasions treated her quite as an equal, with an impartial and, to Susan, entirely blissful roughness. Susan early decided that she liked boys much better than girls.

There was, for example, Jimmy Kane, whose widowed mother took in washing, and so never had any time to clean up her huddled flat, over Heinze's grocery store, or her family of four – two boys and two girls. No one ever saw skin, as in itself it really is, on the faces of Mrs. Kane's children, and Jimmy was always, if comparison be possible, the grimiest of the brood. For some reason Jimmy always had a perpetual slight cold, and his funny flat button of a nose wept, winter and summer alike, though never into an unnecessary handkerchief. His coat-sleeve served, even if its ministrations did not add to the tidiness of his countenance.

Susan often wished she might scrub him, just to see what he really looked like; for she idolized Jimmy. Not that Jimmy ever had paid any special attention to her, except on one occasion. It was merely that he accepted her as part of the human scheme of things, which in itself would almost have been enough to win Susan's affectionate admiration. But one day, as I have hinted, he became the god of her idolatry.

The incident is not precisely idyllic. A certain Joe – Giuseppe Gonfarone; *ætat.* 14 – whose father peddled fruit and vegetables, had recently come into the neighborhood; a black-curled, brown-eyed little devil, already far too wise in the manifold unseemliness of this sad old planet. Joe was strong, stocky, aggressive, and soon posed as something of a bully among the younger boys along Birch Street. Within less than a month he had infected the minds of many with a new and rich vocabulary of oaths and smutty words. Joe was not of the unconsciously foul-mouthed; he relished his depravity. In fact, youngster as he was, Joe had in him the makings of that slimiest product of our cities – the street pimp, or cadet.

It was one fine spring day, three years or so before I met Susan in the Eureka Garage, that Joe, with a group of Birch Street boys, was playing marbles for keeps, just at the bottom of the long incline which carries Birch Street down to the swamp land and general dump at the base of East Rock. Susan was returning home from Orange Street, after bearing her father his full dinner pail, and as she came up to the boys she halted on one foot, using the toe of her free foot meanwhile to scratch mosquito bites upward along her supporting shin.

"H'lo, Susan!" called Jimmy Kane, with his perfunctory good nature. "What's bitin' you?"

Then it was his turn to knuckle-down. Susan, still balanced cranelike, watched him eager-eyed, and was so delighted when he knocked a fine fat reeler of Joe's out of the ring, jumping up with a yell of triumph to pocket it, that she too gave a shrill cheer: "Oh, goody! I knew you'd win!"

The note of ecstasy in her tone infuriated Joe. "Say!" he shrieked. "You getta hell outta here!"

Susan's smile vanished; her white, even teeth – she had all her front ones, she tells me; she was ten – clicked audibly together.

"It's no business of yours!" she retorted.

"You're right; it ain't!" This from Jimmy, still in high good humor. "You stay here if you want. You're as good as him!"

"Who's as good as me?"

"She is!"

"*Her?*" Joe's lips curled back. He turned to the other boys, who had all scrambled to their feet by this time and, instinctively scenting mischief, were standing in a sort of ring. "He says she's good as me!"

Two of the smallest boys tittered, from pure excitement. Susan's nose went up.

"I'm better. I'm not a dago!"

Joe leaped toward Susan and thrust his dense, bull-like head forward, till his eyes were glaring into hers.

"Mebbe I live lika you – eh? Mebbe I live," cried Joe, "with a dirty *whore!*"

There was a gasp from the encircling boys as Susan fell back from this word, which she did not wholly comprehend, but whose vileness she felt, somehow, in her very flesh. Joe, baring gorilla teeth, burst into coarse jubilation.

It was just at this point that Jimmy Kane, younger than Joe by a year or more, and far slighter, jumped on the little ruffian – alas, from behind! – and dealt him as powerful a blow on the head as he could compass; a blow whose effectiveness, I reluctantly admit, was enhanced by the half brick with which Jimmy had first of all prudently provided himself. Joe Gonfarone went to earth, inert, but bleeding profusely.

There was a scuttling of frightened feet in every direction. Susan herself did not stop running until she reached the very top of the Birch Street incline. Then she looked back, her eyes lambent, her heart throbbing, not alone from the rapid ascent. Yes, there was Jimmy —*her* Jimmy! – kneeling in the dust by the still prostrate Joe. Susan could not hear him, but she knew somehow from his attitude that he was scared to death, and that he was asking Joe if he was hurt much. She agonized with her champion, feeling none the less proud of him, and she waited for him at the top of the rise, hoping to thank him, longing to kiss his hands.

But Jimmy, when he did pass her, went by without a glance, at top speed. He was bound for a doctor. So Susan never really managed to thank Jimmy at all. She merely idolized him in secret, a process which proved, however, fairly heart-warming and, in the main, satisfactory.

It took three stitches to mend Joe's head – a fact famous in the junior annals of Birch Street for some years – and soon after he appeared, somewhat broken in spirit, in the street again, his parents moved him, Margharita and the sloe-eyed twins to Bridgeport – very much, be it admitted, to the relief of Jimmy Kane, who had lived for three weeks nursing a lonely fear of dark reprisals.

III

There was one thing about Bob Blake's four-room house – it exactly fitted his family. The floor plan was simple and economically efficient. Between the monolithic door slab – relic of a time when Bob's house had been frankly "in the country" – and the public street lay a walk formed of a single plank supported on chance-set bricks. From the door slab one stepped through the front doorway directly into the parlor. Beyond the parlor lay the kitchen, from which one could pass out through a narrow door to a patch of weed-grown back yard. A ladderlike stair led up from one side of the kitchen, opposite to the single window and the small coal range. At the top of the stair was a slit of unlighted hallway with a door near either end of it. The door toward Birch Street gave upon the bedroom occupied by Bob and Pearl; the rearward door led to Susan's sternly ascetic cubiculum. No one of these four rooms could be described as spacious, but the parlor and Bob's bedroom may have been twelve by fifteen or thereabouts. Susan's quarters were a scant ten by ten.

The solider and more useful pieces of furniture in the house belonged to the régime of Susan's mother – the great black-walnut bed which almost filled the front bedroom; Susan's single iron cot frame; the parlor table with its marble top; the melodeon; the kitchen range; and the deal table in the kitchen, upon which, impartially, food was prepared and meals were served. To these respectable properties Pearl had added from time to time certain other objects of interest or art.

Thus, in the parlor, there was a cane rocking-chair, gilded; and on the wall above the melodeon hung a banjo suspended from a nail by a broad sash of soiled blue ribbon. On the drumhead of the banjo someone had painted a bunch of nondescript flowers, and Pearl always claimed these as her own handiwork, wrought in happier days. This was her one eagerly contested point of pride; for Bob, when in liquor, invariably denied the possibility of her ever having painted "that there bouquet." This flat denial was always the starting point for those more violent Sunday-night quarrels, which had done so much to reduce the furniture of the house to its stouter, more imperishable elements.

During the brief interval between the death of Susan's mother and the arrival of Pearl, Bob had placed his domestic affairs in the hands of an old negro-woman, who came in during the day to clean up, keep an eye on Susan and prepare Bob's dinner. Most of the hours during Bob's absence this poor old creature spent in a rocking-chair, nodding in and out of sleep; and it was rather baby Susan, sprawling about the kitchen floor, who kept an eye on her, than the reverse. Pearl's installation had changed all that. Bob naturally expected any woman he chose to support to work for her board and lodging; and it may be that at first Pearl had been too grateful for any shelter to risk jeopardizing her good luck by shirking. There seems to be no doubt that for a while she did her poor utmost to keep house – but the sloven in her was too deeply rooted not to flower.

By the time Susan was six or seven the interior condition of Bob's house was too crawlingly unpleasant to bear exact description; and even Bob, though callous enough in such matters, began to have serious thoughts of giving Pearl the slip – not to mention his landlord – and of running off with Susan to some other city, where he could make a fresh start and perhaps contrive now and then to get something decent to eat set before him. It never occurred to him to give Susan the slip as well – which would have freed his hands; not because he had a soft spot somewhere for the child, nor because he felt toward her any special sense of moral obligation. Simply, it never occurred to him. Susan was his kid; and if he went she went with him, along with his pipe, his shop tools, and his set of six English razors – his dearest possession, of which he was jealously and irascibly proud.

But, as it happens, Bob never acted upon this slowly forming desire to escape; the desire was quietly checked and insensibly receded; and for this Susan herself was directly responsible.

Very early in life she began to supplement Pearl's feeble housewifery, but it was not until her ninth year that Susan decided to bring about a domestic revolution. Whether or no hatred of dirt be inheritable, I leave to biologists, merely thumbnailing two facts for their consideration: Susan's

mother had hated dirt with an unappeasable hatred; her nightly, after-supper, insensate pursuit of imaginary cobwebs had been one of Bob's choicest grievances against her. And little Susan hated dirt, in all its forms, with an almost equal venom, but with a brain at once more active and more unreeling. She had good reason to hate it. She must either have hated it or been subdued to it. For five years, more or less, she had lived in the midst of dirt and suffered. It had seemed to her one of the inexpungable evils of existence, like mosquitoes, or her father's temper, or the smell of Pearl's cheap talcum powder when warmed by the fumes of cooking cabbage. But gradually it came upon her that dirt only accumulated in the absence of a will to removal.

Once her outreaching mind had grasped – without wordily formulating – this physical and moral law, her course was plain. Since the will to removal was dormant or missing in Pearl, she must supply it. Within the scope of her childish strength, she did supply it. Susan insists that it took her two years merely to overcome the handicap of Pearl's neglect. Her self-taught technique was faulty; proper tools were lacking. There was a bucket which, when filled, she could not lift; a broom that tripped her; high corners she could not reach – corners she had to grow up to, even with the aid of a chair. But in the end she triumphed. By the time she was thirteen – she was thirteen when I first saw in the Eureka Garage – Bob's four rooms were spotless six and one-half days out of every seven.

Even Pearl, in her flaccid way, approved the change. "It beats hell," she remarked affably to Bob one night, "how that ugly little monkey likes to scrub things. She's a real help to me, that child is. But no comp'ny. And she's a sight."

"Well," growled Bob, "she comes by that honest. So was the old woman." They were annoyed when Susan, sitting by them, for the first time within their memory burst into flooding, uncontrollable tears.

IV

I should probably, in my own flaccid way, have lost all track of Susan, if it had not been for certain ugly things that befell in Bob's four-room house one breathless evening – June twentieth of the year 1907. It is a date stamped into my consciousness like a notarial seal. For one thing it happened to be my birthday – my thirty-third, which I was not precisely celebrating, since it was also the anniversary of the day my wife had left me, two years before. Nor was I entirely pleased to have become, suddenly, thirty-three. I counted it the threshold of middle-age. Now that eleven years have passed, and with them my health and the world's futile pretense at peace, I am feeling younger.

This book is about Susan, but it will be simpler if you know something, too, concerning her scribe. Fortunately there is not much that it will be needful to tell.

I was – in those bad, grossly comfortable old days – that least happy of Nature's experiments, a man whose inherited income permitted him to be an idler, and whose tastes urged him to write precious little essays about precious little for the more precious reviews. My half-hearted attempt to practice law I had long abandoned. I lived in a commodious, inherited mansion on Hillhouse Avenue – an avenue which in all fairness must be called aristocratic, since it has no wrong end to it. It is right at both ends, so, naturally, though broad, it is not very long. My grandfather, toward the end of a profitably ill-spent life, built this mansion of sad-colored stone in a somewhat mixed Italian style; my father filled it with expensive and unsightly movables – the spoils of a grand European tour; and I, in my turn, had emptied it of these treasures and refilled it with my own carefully chosen collection of rare furniture, rare Oriental carpets, rare first editions, and costly *objets d'art*. This collection I then anxiously believed, and do still in part believe, to be beautiful – though I am no longer haunted by an earlier fear lest the next generation should repudiate my taste and reverse my opinion. Let the auction rooms of 1960 decide. Neither in flesh nor in spirit shall I attend them.

The tragi-comedy of my luckless marriage I shall not stop here to explain, but its rather mysterious ending had at first largely cut me off from my old family friends and my socially correct acquaintances. When Gertrude left me, their sympathies, or their sense of security, went with her. I can hardly blame them. There had been no glaring scandal, but the fault was inferentially mine. To speak quite brutally, I did not altogether regret their loss. Too many of them had bored me for too many years. I was glad to rely more on the companionship of certain writers and painters which my scribbling had quietly won for me, here and in France. I traveled about a good deal. When at home, I kept my guest rooms filled – often, in the horrid phrase, with "visitors of distinction."

In this way I became a social problem, locally, of some magnitude. Visitors of distinction – even when of eccentric distinction – cannot easily be ignored in a university town. Thus it made it a little awkward, perhaps, that I should so often prove to be their host; a little – less, on the whole, than one would suppose. Within two years – just following Ballou's brief stay with me, on his way to introduce that now forgotten nine-days wonder, Polymorphous Prose, among initiates of the Plymouth Rock Poetry Guild, at Boston – my slight remaining ineligibility was tacitly and finally ignored. The old family friends began to hint that Gertrude, though a splendid woman, had always been a little austere. Possibly there were faults on both sides. One never knew.

And it was just at this hour of social reëstablishment that my birthday swung round again, for the thirty-third time, and brought with it a change in my outer life which was to lead on to even greater changes in all my modes of thinking and feeling. Odd, that a drunken quarrel in a four-room house toward the wrong end of Birch Street could so affect the destiny of a luxurious *dilettante*, living at the very center of bonded respectability, in a mansion of sad-colored stone, on a short broad avenue which is right at both ends!

V

"Never in this (obviously outcast) world!" grumbled Bob Blake, bringing his malletlike fist down on the marble top of the parlor table.

The blow made his half-filled glass jump and clinkle; so he emptied it slowly, then poured in four fingers more, forgetting to add water this time, and sullenly pushed the bottle across to Pearl. But Pearl was fretful. Her watery blue eyes were fixed upon the drumhead of the banjo, where it hung suspended above the melodeon.

"I did so paint them flowers. And well you know it. What's the good of bein' so mean? If you wasn't heeled you'd let me have it my way. Didn't I bring that banjo with me?"

"Hungh! Say you did. What does that prove?"

"I guess it proves somethin', all right."

"Proves you swiped it, likely."

"Me! I ain't that kind, thanks."

"The hell you ain't."

"If you're tryin' to get gay, cut it out!"

"Not me."

"Well, then – quit!"

This was shortly after supper. It was an unusually hot, humid evening; doors and windows stood open to no purpose; and Susan was sitting out on the monolithic door slab, fighting off mosquitoes. She found that this defensive warfare partly distracted her from the witless, interminable bickering within. Moreover, the striated effluvia of whisky, talcum powder, and perspiration had made her head feel a little queer. By comparison, the fetid breath from the exposed mud banks of the salt marsh was almost refreshing.

Possibly it was because her head did feel a little queer that Susan began presently to wonder about things. Between her days at the neighboring public school and her voluntary rounds of housework, Susan had not of late years had much waking time to herself. In younger and less crowded hours, before her father had been informed by the authorities that he must either send his child to school or take the consequences, Susan had put in all her spare moments at wondering. She would see a toad in the back yard, for example, under a plantain leaf, and she would begin to wonder. She would wonder what it felt like to be a toad. And before very long something would happen to her, inside, and she would *be* a toad. She would have toad thoughts and toad feelings… There would stretch above her a dim, green, balancing canopy – the plantain leaf. All about her were soaring, translucent fronds – the grass. It was cool there under the plantain leaf; but she was enormously fat and ugly, her brain felt like sooty cobwebs, and nobody loved her.

Still, she didn't care much. She could feel her soft gray throat, like a blown-into glove finger, pulsing slowly – which was almost as soothing a sensation as letting the swing die down. It made her feel as if Someone – some great unhappy cloudlike Being – were making up a song, a song about most everything; chanting it sleepily to himself – or was it *herself?*– somewhere; and as if she were part of this beautiful, unhappy song. But all the time she knew that if that white fluffy restlessness – that moth miller – fluttered only a little nearer among those golden-green fronds, she knew if it reached the cool rim of her plantain shade, she knew, then, that something terrible would happen to her – knew that something swift and blind, that she couldn't help, would coil deep within her like a spring and so launch her forward, open-jawed. It was awful – awful for the moth miller – but she couldn't *not* do it. She was a toad..

And it was the same with her father. There were things he couldn't not do. She could be – sitting very still in a corner —*be* her father, when he was angry; and she knew he couldn't help it. It was just a dark slow whirling inside, with red sparks flying swiftly out from it. And it hurt while it lasted.

Being her father like that always made her sorry for him. But she wished, and she felt he must often wish, that he couldn't be at all. There were lots of live things that would be happier if they weren't live things; and *if* they weren't, Susan felt, the great cloudlike Being would be less unhappy too.

Naturally, I am giving you Susan's later interpretations of her pre-schoolday wonderings; and a number of you would gasp a little, knowing what firm, delicate imaginings all Susan Blake's later interpretations were, if I should give you her pen name as well – which I have promised myself not to do. This is not an official study of a young writer of peculiar distinction; it is merely an unpretending book about a little girl I knew and a young married woman I still know – one and the same person. It is what I have named it – that only: *The Book of Susan*.

Meanwhile, this humid June night – to the sordid accompaniment of Bob and Pearl snarling at each other half-drunkenly within – Susan waits for us on the monolithic door slab; and there is a new wonder in her dizzy little head. I can't do better than let her tell you in her own words what this new wonder was like.

"Ambo, dear" – my name, by the way, is Ambrose Hunt; Captain Hunt, of the American Red Cross, at the present writing, which I could date from a sleepy little village in Southern France – "Ambo, dear, it was the moon, mostly. There was a pink bud of light in the heat mist, way off beyond East Rock, and then the great wild rose of the moon opened slowly through it. Papa, inside, was sounding just like a dog when he's bullying another dog, walking up on the points of his toes, stiff legged, round him. So I tried to escape, tried to be the moon; tried to feel floaty and shining and beautiful, and – and remote. But I couldn't manage it. I never could make myself be anything not alive. I've tried to be stones, but it's no good. It won't work. I can be trees – a little. But usually I have to be animals, or men and women – and of course they're animals too.

"So I began wondering why I liked the moon, why just looking at it made me feel happy. It couldn't talk to me; or love me. All it could do was to be up there, sometimes, and shine. Then I remembered about mythology. Miss Chisholm, in school, was always telling us about gods and goddesses. She said we were children, so we could recreate the gods for ourselves, because they belonged to the child age of the world. She talked like that a lot, in a faded-leaf voice, and none of us ever understood her. The truth is, Ambo, we never paid any attention to her; she smiled too much and too sadly, without meaning it; and her eyelashes were white. All the same, that night somehow I remembered Artemis, the virgin moon goddess, who slipped silently through dark woods at dusk, hunting with a silvery bow. Being a virgin seemed to mean that you didn't care much for boys. But I did always like boys better than girls, so I decided I could never be a virgin. And yet I loved the thought of Artemis from that moment. I began to think about her – oh, intensely! – always keeping off by herself; cool, and shining, and – and detached. And there was one boy she *had* cared for; I remembered that, too, though I couldn't remember his name. A naked, brown sort of boy, who kept off by himself on blue, distant hills. So Artemis wasn't really a virgin at all. She was just – awfully particular. She liked clean, open places, and the winds, and clear, swift water. What she hated most was *stuffiness!* That's why I decided then and there, Ambo, that Artemis should be my goddess, my own pet goddess; and I made up a prayer to her. I've never forgotten it. I often say it still..

Dearest, dearest Far-Away,
Can you hear me when I pray?
Can you hear me when I cry?
Would you care if I should die?
No, you wouldn't care at all;
But I love you most of all.

"It isn't very good, Ambo, but it's the first rhyme I ever made up out of my own head. And I just talked it right off to Artemis without any trouble. But I had hardly finished it, when – "

What had happened next was the crash of glassware, followed by Bob's thick voice, bellowing: "C'm ba' here! Damned slut! Tell yeh t' c'm ba' an' – an' 'pol'gize!"

Susan heard a strangling screech from Pearl, the jar of a heavy piece of furniture overturned. The child's first impulse was to run out into Birch Street and scream for help. She tells me her spine knew all at once that something terrible had happened – or was going to happen. Then, in an odd flash of hallucination, she saw *Artemis* poised the fleetingest second before her – beautiful, a little disdainful, divinely unafraid. So Susan gulped, dug her nails fiercely into her palms, and hurried back through the parlor into the kitchen, where she stumbled across the overturned table and fell, badly bruising her cheek.

As she scrambled to her feet a door slammed to, above. Her father, in a grotesque crouching posture, was mounting the ladderlike stair. On the floor at the stair's foot lay the parchment head of Pearl's banjo, which he had cut from its frame. Susan distinctly caught the smudged pinks and blues of the nondescript flowers. She realized at once that her father was bound on no good errand. And Pearl was trapped. Susan called to her father, daringly, a little wildly. He slued round to her, leaning heavily on the stair rail, his face green-white, his lips held back by some evil reflex in a fixed, appalling grin.

It was the face of a madman… He raised his right hand, slowly, and a tiny prismatic gleam darted from the blade of an opened razor – one of his precious set of six. He had evidently used it to destroy the banjo head, which he would never have done in his right mind. But now he made a shocking gesture with the blade, significant of other uses; then turned, crouching once more, to continue upward. Susan tried to cry out, tried to follow him, until the room slid from its moorings into a whirlpool of humming blackness..

That is all Susan remembers for some time. It is just as well.

VI

What Susan next recalls is an intense blare of light, rousing her from her nothingness, like trumpets. Her immediate confused notion was that the gates of hell had been flung wide for her; and when a tall black figure presently cut across the merciless rays and towered before her, she thought it must be the devil. But the intense blare came from the head lights of my touring car, and the tall black devil was I. A greatly puzzled and compassionate devil I was too! Maltby Phar – that exquisite anarchist – was staying with me, and we had run down to the shore for dinner, hoping to mitigate the heat by the ride, and my new sensation of frustrate middle-age by broiled live lobsters. It was past eleven. I had just dropped Maltby at the house and had run my car round to the garage where Bob worked, meaning to leave it there overnight so Bob could begin patching at it the first thing in the morning. It had been bucking its way along on three cylinders or less all day.

Bob's garage lay back from the street down a narrow alley. Judge, then, of my astonishment as I nosed my car up to its shut double doors! There, on the concrete incline before the doors, lay a small crumpled figure, half-curled, like an unearthed cut-worm, about a shining dinner pail. I brought the car to a sudden dead stop. The small figure partly uncrumpled, and a white, blinded little face lifted toward me. It was Bob's youngster! What was she up to, lying there on the ribbed concrete at this time of night? And in heaven's name – why the dinner pail? I jumped down to investigate.

"You're Susan Blake, aren't you?"

"Yes" – with a whispered gasp – "your Royal Highness."

Susan says she doesn't know just why she addressed the devil in that way, unless she was trying to flatter him and so get round him.

"I'm not so awfully bad," she went on, "if you don't count thinking things too much!"

The right cheek of her otherwise delicately modeled child's face was a swollen lump of purple and green. I dropped down on one knee beside her.

"Why, you poor little lady! You're hurt!"

Instantly she sprang to her feet, wild-eyed.

"No, no! It's not me – it's Pearl! Oh, quick – please! He had a razor!"

"Razor? *Who* did?" I seized her hands. "I'm Mr. Hunt, dear. Your father often works on my car. Tell me what's wrong!"

She was still half dazed. "I – I can't see why I'm down here – with papa's dinner pail. Pearl was upstairs, and I tried to stop him from going." Then she began to whimper like a whipped puppy. "It's all mixed. I'm scared."

"Of course – of course you are; but it's going to be all right." I led her to the car and lifted her to the front seat. "Hold on a minute, Susan. I'll be back with you in less than no time!"

I sounded my horn impatiently. After an interval, a slow-footed car washer inside the garage began trundling the doors back to admit me. I ran to him.

No. Bob, he left at six, same as usual. He hadn't been round since… His kid, eh? Mebbe the heat had turned her queer. Nuff to addle most folks, the heat was..

I saw that he knew nothing, and snapped him off with a sharp request to crank the car for me. As he did so, I jumped in beside Susan.

"Where do you live, Susan? Oh, yes, of course – Birch Street. Bob told me that… Eh? You don't want to go home?"

"Never, please. Never, never! I *won't!*" Proclaiming this, she flung Bob's dinner pail from her and it bounced and clattered down the asphalt. "It's too late," she added, in a frightened whisper: "I know it is!"

Then she seized my arm – thereby almost wrecking us against a fire hydrant – and clung to me, sobbing. I was puzzled and – yes – alarmed. Bob was a bad customer. The child's bruised face.. something she had said about a razor – ? And instantly I made up my mind.

"I'll take you to my house, Susan. Mrs. Parrot" – Mrs. Parrot was my housekeeper – "will fix you up for to-night. Then I'll go round and see Bob; see what's wrong." I felt her thin fingers dig into my arm convulsively. "Yes," I reassured her, taking a corner perilously at full speed, "that will be much better. You'll like Mrs. Parrot."

Rather recklessly, I hoped this might prove to be true; for Mrs. Parrot was a little difficult at times..

It was Maltby Phar who saw me coming up the steps with a limp child in my arms, and who opened the screen door for me. "Aha!" he exclaimed. "Done it this time, eh! Always knew you would, sooner or later. You're too damned absent-minded to drive a car. You – "

"Nonsense!" I struck in. "Tell Mrs. Parrot to ring up Doctor Stevens. Then send her to me." And I continued on upstairs with Susan.

When Mrs. Parrot came, Susan was lying with closed eyes in the middle of a great white embroidered coverlet, upon which her shoes had smeared greasy, permanent-looking stains.

"Mercy," sighed Mrs. Parrot, "if you've killed the poor creature, nobody's sorrier than I am! But why couldn't you have laid her down on the floor? She wouldn't have known."

In certain respects Mrs. Parrot was invaluable to me; but then and there I suspected that Mrs. Parrot would, in the not-too-distant future, have to go.

Within five minutes Doctor Stevens arrived, and, after hurried explanations, Maltby and I left him in charge – and then made twenty-five an hour to Birch Street.

However, Susan's intuitions had been correct. We found Bob's four-room house quite easily. It was the house with the crowd in front of it… We were an hour too late.

"Cut her throat clean acrost; and his own after," shrilled Mrs. Perkins to us – Mrs. Perkins, who lived three doors nearer the right end of Birch Street. "But it's only what was to be looked for, and I guess it'll be a lesson to some. You can't expect no better end than that," perorated Mrs. Perkins to us and her excited neighbors, while her small gray-green eyes snapped with electric malice, "you can't expect no better end than that to sech *brazen* immorality!"

"My God," groaned Maltby, as we sped away, "How they have enjoyed it all! Why, you almost ruined the evening for them when you told them you'd found the child! They were hoping to discover her body in the cellar or down the well. Ugh! What a world!

"By the way," he added, as we turned once more into the dignified breadth of Hillhouse Avenue, "what'll you do with the homely little brat? Put her in some kind of awful institution?"

The bland tone of his assumption irritated me. I ground on the brakes.

"Certainly not! I like her. If she returns the compliment, and her relatives don't claim her, she'll stay on here with me."

"Hum. Bravo… About two weeks," said Maltby Phar.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

I

IT was not Susan who left me at the end of two weeks; it was Mrs. Parrot. Maltby had departed within three days, hastening perforce to editorial duties in New York. He then edited, with much furtive groaning to sympathetic friends, the *Garden Exquisite*, a monthly magazine *de luxe*, devoted chiefly to advertising matter, and to photographs taken – by request of far-seeing wives and daughters – at the country clubs and on the country estates of our minor millionaires. For a philosophical anarch, rather a quaint occupation! Yet one must live… Maltby, however, had threatened a return as soon as possible, "to look over the piteous *débâcle*." There was no probability that Mrs. Parrot would ever return.

"You cannot expect me," maintained Mrs. Parrot, "to wait on the child of a murdering suicide. Especially," she added, "when he was nothing but a common sort of man to begin with. I'm as sorry for that poor little creature as anybody in New Haven; but there are places for such."

That was her ultimatum. My reply was two weeks' notice, and a considerable monetary gift to soften the blow.

Hillhouse Avenue, in general, so far as I could discover, rather sympathized with Mrs. Parrot. She at once obtained an excellent post, becoming housekeeper for the Misses Carstairs, spinster sisters of incredible age, who lived only two doors from me in a respectable mansion whose portico resembled an Egyptian tomb. Wandering freshmen from the Yale campus frequently mistook it for the home office of one of the stealthier secret societies.

There, silently ensconced, Mrs. Parrot burned with a hard, gemlike flame, and awaited my final downfall. So did the Misses Carstairs, who, being cousins of my wife, had remained firmly in opposition. And rumor had it that other members of neighboring families were suffering discomfort from the proximity of Susan. It was as if a tiny, almost negligible speck of coal dust had blown into the calm, watchful eye of the *genius loci*, and was gradually inflaming it – with resultant nervous irritation to all its members.

Susan was happily unconscious of these things. Her gift of intuition had not yet projected itself into that ethereal region which conserves the more tenuous tone and the subtler distinction – denominate "society." For the immediate moment she was bounded in a nutshell, yet seemed to count herself a princess of infinite space – yes, in spite of bad dreams. We – Doctor Stevens and I – had put her to bed in the large, coolly distinguished corner room formerly occupied by Gertrude. This room opened directly into my own. Doctor Stevens counselled bed for a few days, and Susan seemed well content to obey his mandate. Meanwhile, I had requested Mrs. Parrot to buy various necessities for her – toothbrushes, nightdresses, day dresses, petticoats, and so on. Mrs. Parrot had supposed I should want the toilet articles inexpensive, and the clothing plain but good.

"Good, by all means, Mrs. Parrot," I had corrected, "but not plain. As pretty and frilly as possible!"

Mrs. Parrot had been inclined to argue the matter.

"When that poor little creature goes from here," she had maintained, "flimsy, fussy things will be of no service to her. None. She'll need coarse, substantial articles that will bear usage."

"Do you like to wear coarse, substantial articles, Mrs. Parrot?" I had mildly asked. "So far as I am permitted to observe – "

Mrs. Parrot had resented the implication. "I hope in my outer person, Mr. Hunt, that I show a decent respect for my employers, but I've never been one to pamper myself on linjery, if I may use

the word – not believing it wholesome. Nor to discuss it with gentlemen. But if I don't know what it's wisest and best to buy in this case, who," she had demanded of heaven, "does?"

"Possibly," heaven not replying, had been my response, "*I* do. At any rate, I can try."

It was fun trying. I ran down on the eight o'clock to New York and strolled up and down Fifth Avenue, shopping here and there as the fancy moved me. Shopping – with a well-filled pocketbook – is not a difficult art. Women exaggerate its difficulties for their own malign purposes. In two hours of the most casual activity I had bought a great number of delightful things – for my little daughter, you know. Her age?.. Oh, well – I should think about fourteen. Let's call it 'going on fourteen.' Then it's sure to be all right.

It *was* all right – essentially. By which I mean that the parties of the first and second parts – to wit, Susan and I – were entirely and blissfully satisfied.

Susan liked particularly a lacy sort of nightgown all knotted over with little pink ribbony rosebuds; there was a coquettish boudoir cap to match it – suggestive somehow of the caps village maidens used to wear in old-fashioned comic operas; and a pink silk kimono embroidered with white chrysanthemums, to top off the general effect. Needless to say, Mrs. Parrot disapproved of the general effect, deeming it, no doubt with some reason, a thought flamboyant for Gertrude's coolly distinguished corner room.

But Susan, propped straight up by now against pillows, wantoned in this finery. She would stroke the pink silk of the kimono with her thin, sensitive fingers, sigh deeply, happily, then close her eyes.

There was nothing much wrong with her. The green-and-purple bruise on her cheek – a somber note which would not harmonize with the frivolity of the boudoir cap – was no longer painful. But, as Doctor Stevens put it, "The little monkey's all in." She was tired, tired out to the last tiny filament of her tiniest nerve..

During those first days with me she asked no awkward questions; and few of any kind. Indeed, she rarely spoke at all, except with her always-speaking black eyes. For the time being the restless-terrier-look had gone from them; they were quiet and deep, and said "*Thank you*," to Doctor Stevens, to Mrs. Parrot, to me, with a hundred modulating shades of expression. In spite of a clear-white, finely drawn face, against which the purple bruise stood out in shocking relief; in spite of entirely straight but gossamery black hair; in spite of a rather short nose and a rather wide mouth – there was a fascination about the child which no one, not even the hostile Mrs. Parrot, wholly escaped.

"That poor, peeny little creature," admitted Mrs. Parrot, on the very morning she left me, "has a way of looking at you – so you can't talk to her like you'd ought to. It's somebody's duty to speak to her in a Christian spirit. She never says her prayers. Nor mentions her father. And don't seem to care what's happened to him, or why she's here, or what's to come to her. And what is to come to her," demanded Mrs. Parrot, "if she stays on in this house, without a God-fearing woman, and one you can't fool most days? Not that I could be persuaded, having made other arrangements. And if I may say a last word, the wild talk I've heard here isn't what I've been used to. Nor to be approved of. No vulgarity. None. I don't accuse. But free with matters better left to the church; or in the dark – where they belong. All I hold is, that some things are sacred, and some unmentionable; and conversation should take cognizance of such!"

I had never known her so moved or so eloquent. I strove to reassure her.

"You are quite right, Mrs. Parrot. I apologize for any painful moments my friends and I have given you. But don't worry too much about Susan. So far as Susan's concerned, I promise to 'take cognizance' in every possible direction."

It was clear to me that I should have to expend a good deal of care upon engaging another housekeeper at once. And, of course, a governess – for lessons and things. And a maid? Yes; Susan would need a maid, if only to do her mending. Obviously, neither the housekeeper, the governess, nor I could be expected to take cognizance of that.

II

But I anticipate. Two weeks before Mrs. Parrot's peroration, on the very evening of the day Maltby Phar had left me, Susan and I had had our first good talk together. My memorable shopping tour had not yet come off, and Susan, having pecked birdlike at a very light supper, was resting – semi-recumbent – in bed, clothed in a suit of canary-yellow pajamas, two sizes too big for her, which I was rather shaken to discover belonged to Nora, my quiet little Irish parlor maid. I had not supposed that Nora indulged in night gear filched from musical comedy. However, Nora had meant to be kind in a good cause; though canary yellow is emphatically a color for the flushed and buxom and should never be selected for peeny, anemic little girls. It did make Susan look middling ghastly, as if quarantined from all access to Hygeia, the goddess! Perhaps that is why, when I perched beside her on the edge of Gertrude's colonial four-poster, I felt an unaccustomed prickling sensation back of my eyes.

"How goes it, canary bird?" I asked, taking the thin, blue-threaded hand that lay nearest to me.

Susan's fingers at once curled trustfully to mine, and there came something very like a momentary glimmer of mischief into her dark eyes.

"If I was an honest-to-God canary, I could sing to you," said Susan. "I'd like to do something for you, Mr. Hunt. Something you'd like, I mean."

"Well, you can, dear. You can stop calling me 'Mr. Hunt'! My first name's pretty awkward, though. It's Ambrose."

For an instant Susan considered my first name, critically, then very slowly shook her head. "It's a nice name. It's *too* nice, isn't it – for every day?"

I laughed. "But it's all I have, Susan. What shall we do about it?"

Then Susan laughed, too; it was the first time I had heard her laugh. "I guess your mother was feeling kind of stuck up when she called you that!"

"Most mothers do feel kind of stuck up over their first babies, Susan."

She considered this, and nodded assent, "But it's silly of them, anyway," she announced. "There are so many babies all the time, everywhere. There's nothing new about babies, Ambo."

"Aha!" I exclaimed. "You knew from the first how to chasten my stuck-up name, didn't you? 'Ambo' is a delightful improvement."

"It's more like you," said Susan, tightening her fingers briefly on mine.

And presently she closed her eyes. When, after a long still interval, she opened them, they were cypress-shaded pools.

"Tell me what happened, Ambo."

"He's dead, Susan. Pearl's dead, too."

She closed her eyes again, and two big tears slipped out from between her lids, wetting her thick eyelashes and staining her bruised and her pallid cheek.

"He couldn't help it. He was made like that, inside. He was no damn good, Ambo. That's what he was always saying to Pearl – 'You're no damn good.' She wasn't, either. And he wasn't, much. I guess it's better for him and Pearl to *be* dead."

This – and the two big tears – was her good-by to Bob, to Pearl, to the four-room house; her good-by to Birch Street. It shocked me at the time. I released her hand and stood up to light a cigarette – staring the while at Susan. Where had she found her precocious brains? And had she no heart? Had something of Bob's granitic harshness entered into this uncanny, this unnatural child? Should I live to regret my decision to care for her, to educate her? When I died, would she say – to whom? – "I guess it's better for him to *be* dead. Poor Ambo! He was no damn good."

But even as I shuddered, I smiled. For, after all, she was right; the child was right. She had merely uttered, truthfully, thoughts which a more conventional mind, more conventionally disciplined, would have known how to conceal – yes, to conceal even from itself. Genius was very like that.

"Susan!" I suddenly demanded. "Have you any relatives who will try to claim you?"

"Claim me?"

"Yes. Want to take care of you?"

"Mamma's sister-in-law lives in Hoboken," said Susan. "But she's a widow; and she's got seven already."

"Would you like to stay here with me?"

For all answer she flopped sidelong down from the pillows and hid her bruised face in the counterpane. Her slight, canary-clad shoulders were shaken with stifled weeping.

"That settles it!" I affirmed. "I'll see my lawyer in the morning, and he'll get the court to appoint me your guardian. Come now! If you cry about it, I'll think you don't want me for guardian. Do you?"

She turned a blubbered, wistful face toward me from the counterpane. Her eyes answered me. I leaned over, smoothed a pillow and slipped it beneath her tired head, then kissed her unbruised cheek and walked quietly back into my own room – where I rang for Mrs. Parrot.

When she arrived, "Mrs. Parrot," I suggested, "please make Susan comfortable for the night, will you? And I'll appreciate it if you treat her exactly as you would my own child."

It took Mrs. Parrot at least a minute to hit upon something she quite dared to leave with me.

"Very well, Mr. Hunt. Not having an own child, and not knowing – you can say that. Not that it's the same thing, though you *do* say it! But I'll make her comfortable – and time tells. In darker days, I hope you'll be able to say that poor, peeny little creature has done the same by you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Parrot. Good-night."

"A good night to you, Mr. Hunt," elaborated Mrs. Parrot, not without malice; "many of them, Mr. Hunt; many of them, I'm sure."

III

By the time Mrs. Parrot left us, housekeeper, governess, and maid had been obtained in New York through agencies of the highest respectability.

Miss Goucher, the housekeeper, proved to be a tall, big-framed spinster, rising fifty; a capable, taciturn woman with a positive talent for minding her own affairs. She had bleak, light-gray eyes, a rudderlike nose, and a harsh, positive way of speech that was less disagreeable than it might have been, because she so seldom spoke at all. Having hoped for a more amiable presence, I was of two minds over keeping her; but she took charge of my house so promptly and efficiently, and effaced herself so thoroughly – a difficult feat for so definite a figure – that in the end there was nothing I could complain of; and so she stayed.

Miss Disbrow on the other hand, who came as governess, was all that I had dared to wish for; a graceful, light-footed, soft-voiced girl – she was not yet thirty – with charming manners, a fluent command of the purest convent-taught French, a nice touch on the piano, and apparently some slight acquaintance with the solider branches. Merely to associate with Miss Disbrow would, I felt, do much for Susan.

I was less certain about Sonia, the maid. I had asked for a middle-aged English maid. Sonia was Russian, and she was only twenty-three. But she was sent directly to me from service with Countess Dimbrovitski – formerly, as you know, Maud Hochstetter, of Omaha – and brought with her a most glowing reference for skill, honesty, and unfailing tact. Countess Dimbrovitski did not explain in the reference, dated from Newport, why she had permitted this paragon to slip from her; nor did it occur to me to investigate the point. But Sonia later explained it all, in intimate detail, to Susan – as we shall see.

I had feared that Susan might be at first a little bewildered by the attentions of Sonia and of Miss Disbrow; so I explained the unusual situation to Miss Goucher and Miss Disbrow – with certain reservations – and asked them to make it clear to Sonia. Miss Goucher merely nodded, curtly enough, and said she understood. Miss Disbrow proved more curious and more voluble.

"How wonderful of you, Mr. Hunt!" she exclaimed. "To take in a poor little waif and do all this for her! Personally, I count it a privilege to be allowed some share in so generous an action. Oh, but I do – I do. One likes to feel, even when forced to work for one's living, that one has some little opportunity to do good in the world. Life isn't," asked Miss Disbrow, "all money-grubbing and selfishness, is it?" And as I found no ready answer, she concluded: "But I need hardly ask that of you!"

For the fleetingest second I found myself wondering whether Miss Disbrow, deep down in her hidden heart, might not be a minx. Yet her glance, the happiest mixture of frankness, timidity, and respectful admiration, disarmed me. I dismissed the unworthy suspicion as absurd.

I was a little troubled, though, when Susan that same evening after dinner came to me in the library and seated herself on a low stool facing my easy-chair.

"Ambo," she said, "I've been blind as blind, haven't I?"

"Have you?" I responded. "For a blind girl, it's wonderful how you find your way about!"

"But I'm not joking – and that's just it," said Susan.

"What's wrong, dear?" I asked. "I see something is."

"Yes. I am. The wrongest possible. I've just dumped myself on you, and stayed here; and – and I've no damn business here at all!"

"I thought we were going to forget the damns and hells, Susan?"

"We are," said Susan, coloring sharply and looking as if she wanted to cry. "But when you've heard them, and worse, every minute all your life – it's pretty hard to forget. You must scold me more!" Then with a swift movement she leaned forward and laid her cheek on my knee. "You're too good to me, Ambo. I oughtn't to be here – wearing wonderful dresses, having a maid to do my hair

and – and polish me and button me and mend me. I wasn't meant to have an easy time; I wasn't born for it. First thing you know, Ambo, I'll get to thinking I was – and be mean to you somehow!"

"I'll risk that, Susan."

"Yes, but I oughtn't to let you. I could learn to be somebody's maid like Sonia; and if I study hard – and I'm going to! – some day I could be a governess like Miss Disbrow; only really know things, not just pretend. Or when I'm old enough, a housekeeper like Miss Goucher! That's what you should make me do – work for you! I can clean things better than Nora now; I never skip underneaths. Truly, Ambo, it's all wrong, my having people work for me – at your expense. I know it is! Miss Disbrow made it all clear as clear, right away."

"What! Has Miss Disbrow been stuffing this nonsense into your head!" I was furious.

"Oh, not in words!" cried Susan. "She talks just the other way. She keeps telling me how fortunate I am to have a guardian like you, and how I must be so careful never to annoy you or make you regret what you've done for me. Then she sighs and says life is very hard and unjust to many girls born with more advantages. Of course she means herself, Ambo. You see, she hates having to work at all. She's much nicer to look at and talk to, but she reminds me of Pearl. She's no damn – she's no good, Ambo dear. She's hard where she ought to be soft, and soft where she ought to be hard. She tries to get round people, so she can coax things out of them. But she'll never get round Miss Goucher, Ambo – or me." And Susan hesitated, lifting her head from my knee and looking up at me doubtfully, only to add, "I – I'm not so sure about *you*."

"Indeed. You think, possibly, Miss Disbrow might get round me, eh?"

"Well, she might – if I wasn't here," said Susan. "She might marry you."

My explosion of laughter – I am ordinarily a quiet person – startled Susan. "Have I said something awful again?" she cried.

"Dreadful!" I sputtered, wiping my eyes. "Why, you little goose! Don't you see how I need you? To plumb the depths for me – to protect me? I thought I was your guardian, Susan; but that's just my mannish complacency. I'm not your guardian at all, dear. You're mine."

But I saw at once that my mirth had confused her, had hurt her feelings… I reached out for her hands and drew her upon my knees.

"Susan," I said, "Miss Disbrow couldn't marry me even if she got round me, and wanted to. You see, I have a wife already."

Susan stared at me with wide, frightened eyes. "You have, Ambo? Where is she?"

"She left me two years ago."

"Left you?" It was evident that she did not understand. "Oh – what will she say when she comes home and finds *me* here? She won't like it; she won't like me!" wailed Susan. "I know she won't."

"Hush, dear. She's not coming home again. She made up her mind that she couldn't live with me any more."

"What's her name?"

"Gertrude."

"Why couldn't she live with you, Ambo?"

"She said I was cruel to her."

"*Weren't* you good to her, Ambo? Why? Didn't you like her?"

The rapid questions were so unexpected, so searching, that I gasped. And my first impulse was to lie to Susan, to put her off with a few conventional phrases – phrases that would lead the child to suppose me a wronged, lonely, broken-hearted man. This would win me a sympathy I had not quite realized that I craved. But Susan's eyes were merciless, and I couldn't manage it. Instead, I surprised myself by blurting out: "That's about it, Susan. I didn't like her – enough. We couldn't hit it off, somehow. I'm afraid I wasn't very kind."

Instantly Susan's thin arms went about my neck, and her cheek was pressed tight to mine.

"Poor Ambo!" she whispered. "I'm so sorry you weren't kind. It must *hurt* you so." Then she jumped from my knees.

"Ambo!" she demanded. "Is my room —*her* room? Is it?"

"Certainly not. It isn't hers any more. She's never coming back, I tell you. She put me out of her life once for all; and God knows I've put her out of mine!"

"If you can't let me have another room, Ambo – I'll have to go."

"Why? Hang it all, Susan, don't be silly! Don't make difficulties where none exist! What an odd, overstrained child you are!" I was a little annoyed.

"Yes," nodded Susan gravely, "I see now why Gertrude left you. But she must be awfully stupid not to know it's only your outside that's made like that!"

Next morning, without a permissive word from me, Susan had Miss Goucher move all her things to a small bedroom at the back of the house, overlooking the garden. This silent flitting irritated me not a little, and that afternoon I had a frank little talk with Miss Disbrow – franker, perhaps, than I had intended. Miss Disbrow at once gave me notice, and left for New York within two hours, letting it be known that she expected her trunks to be sent after her.

"Gutter-snipes are not my specialty," was her parting word.

IV

There proved to be little difficulty in getting myself appointed Susan's guardian. No one else wanted the child.

I promised the court to do my best for her; to treat her, in fact, as I would my own flesh and blood. It might well be, I said, that before long I should legally adopt her. In any event, if this for some unforeseen reason proved inadvisable, I assured the court that Susan's future would be provided for. The court benignly replied that, as it stood, I was acting very handsomely in the matter; very handsomely; no doubt about it. But there was a dim glimmer behind the juridic spectacles that seemed to imply: "Handsomely, my dear sir, but whether wisely or no is another question, which, as the official champion of widows and orphans, I am not called upon to decide."

It was with a new sense of responsibility that I opened an account in Susan's name with a local savings bank, and a week later added a short but efficient codicil to my will.

In the meantime – but with alert suspicions – I interviewed several highly recommended applicants for Miss Disbrow's deserted post; only to find them wanting. Poor things! Combined, they could hardly have met all the requirements, æsthetic and intellectual, which I had now set my heart upon finding in one lone governess for Susan! It would have needed, by this, a subtly modernized Hypatia to fulfill my ideal.

I might, of course, have waited for October to send Susan to a select private school in the vicinage, patronized by the little daughters of our more cautious families. It was, by neighborly consent, an excellent school, where carefully sterilized cultures – physical, moral, mental, and social – were painlessly injected into the blue blood streams of our very nicest young girls. I say that I might have done so, but this is a euphemism. On the one hand, I shrank from exposing Susan to possible snubs; on the other, a little bird whispered that Miss Garnett, principal of the school, would not care to expose her carefully sterilized cultures to an alien contagion. Bearers of contagion – whether physical, moral, mental, or social – were not sympathetic to Miss Garnett's *clientèle*. In Mrs. Parrot's iron phrase, there are places for such.

Public schools, to wit! But in those long-past days – before Susan taught me that there are just two kinds of persons, big and little; those you can do nothing for, because they can do nothing for themselves, and those you can do nothing for, because they can do everything for themselves – in those days, I admit that I had my own finicky fears. Public schools were all very well for the children of men who could afford nothing better. They had, for example, given Bob Blake's daughter a pretty fair preliminary training; but they would never do for Ambrose Hunt's ward. *Noblesse*– or, at any rate, *largesse—oblige*.

Yet here was a quandary: Public schools, in my estimation, being too vulgar for Susan; and Susan, in the estimation of Hillhouse Avenue, being too vulgar for private ones; yea, and though I still took cognizance, no subtly modernized Hypatia coming to me highly recommended for a job – how in the name of useless prosperity was I to get poor little Susan properly educated at all!

It was Susan who solved this difficulty for me, as she was destined to solve most of my future difficulties, and all of her own.

She soon turned the public world about her into an extra-select, super-private school. She impressed all who came into contact with her, and made of them her devoted – if often unconscious – instructors. And she began by impressing Miss Goucher and Nora and Sonia, and Philip Farmer, assistant professor of philosophy in Yale University; and Maltby Phar, anarchist editor of *The Garden Exquisite;* and – first and chiefly – me.

The case of Phil Farmer was typical. Phil and I had been classmates in the dark backward and abysm, and we were still, in a manner of speaking, friends. I mean that, though we had few tastes in common, we kept on liking each other a good deal. Phil was a gentle-hearted, stiff-headed sort of man,

with a conscience – formed for him and handed on by a long line of Unitarian ministers – a conscience which drove him to incredible labor at altitudes few of us attain, and where even Phil, it seemed to me, found breathing difficult. Not having been thrown with much feminine society on his chosen heights, he had remained a bachelor. The Metaphysical Mountains are said to be infested with women, but they cluster, I am told, below the snow line. Phil did not even meet them by climbing through them; he always ballooned straight up for the Unmelting; and when he occasionally dropped down, his psychic chill seldom wore entirely off before he was ready to ascend again. This protected him; for he was a tall, dark-haired fellow whose features had the clear-cut gravity of an Indian chieftain; his rare, friendly smile was a delight. So he would hardly otherwise have escaped.

Perhaps once a week it was his habit to drop in after dinner and share with me three or four pipes' worth of desultory conversation. We seldom talked shop; since mine did not interest him, nor his me. Mostly we just ambled aimlessly round the outskirts of some chance neutral topic – who would win the big game, for example. It amused neither of us, but it rested us both.

One night, perhaps a month after Susan had come to me, I returned late from a hot day's trip to New York – one more unsuccessful quest after Hypatia Rediviva – and found Phil and Susan sitting together on the screened terrace at the back of my house, overlooking the garden. It was not my custom to spend the muggy midsummer months in town, but this year I had been unwilling to leave until I could capture and carry off Hypatia Rediviva with me. Moreover, I did not know where to go. The cottage at Watch Hill belonged to Gertrude, and was in consequence no longer used by either of us. As a grass widower I had, in summer, just travelled about. Now, with a ward of fourteen to care for, just travelling about no longer seemed the easiest solution; yet I hated camps and summer hotels. I should have to rent a place somewhere, that was certain; but where? With the world to choose from, a choice proved difficult. I was marking time.

My stuffy fruitless trip had decided me to mark time no longer. Hypatia or no Hypatia, Susan must be taken to the hills or the sea. It was this thought that simmered in my brain as I strolled out to the garden terrace and overheard Susan say to Phil: "But I think it's *much* easier to believe in the devil than it is in God! Don't you? The devil isn't all-wise, all-good, all-everything! He's a lot more like *us*."

I stopped short and shamelessly listened.

"That's an interesting concept," responded Phil, with his slow, friendly gravity. "You mean, I suppose, that if we must be anthropomorphic, we ought at least to be consistent."

"Wouldn't it be funny," said Susan, "if I did mean that without knowing it?" There was no flippancy, no irony in her tone. "'*An-thro-po-mor-phic*.. '" she added, savoring its long-drawn-outness. Susan never missed a strange word; she always pounced on it at once, unerringly, and made it hers.

"That's a Greek word," explained Phil.

"It's a good word," said Susan, "if it has a tremendous lot packed up in it. If it hasn't, it's much too long."

"I agree with you," said Phil; "but it has."

"What?" asked Susan.

"It would take me an hour to tell you."

"Oh, I'm glad!" cried Susan. "It must be a wonderful word! Please go on till Ambo comes!"

I decided to take a bath, and tiptoed softly and undetected away.

V

After that evening Phil began to drop in every two or three nights, and he did not hesitate to tell me that the increasing frequency of his visits was due to his progressive interest in Susan.

"She's a curious child," he explained; which was true in any sense you chose to take it, and all the way back to the Latin *curiosus*, "careful, diligent, thoughtful; from *cura*, care," and so on..

"I've never seen much of children," Phil continued; "never had many chances, as it happens. My sister has three boys, but she's married to a narrow-gauge missionary, and lives – to call it that – in Ping Lung, or some such place. I've the right address somewhere, I think – in a notebook. Bertha sends me snapshots of the boys from time to time, but I can't say I've ever felt lonely because of their exile. Funny. Perhaps it's because I never liked Bertha much. Bertha has a sloppy mind – you know, with chance scraps of things floating round in it. Nothing coheres. But you take this youngster of yours, now – I call her yours – "

"Do!" I interjected.

"Well, there's the opposite extreme! Susan links everything up, everything she gets hold of – facts, fancies, guesses, feelings; the whole psychic menagerie. Chains them all together somehow, and seems to think they'll get on comfortably in the same tent. Of course they won't – can't – and that's the danger for her! But she's stimulating, Hunt" – Phil always called me Hunt, as if just failing whole-heartedly to accept me – "she's positively stimulating! A mind like that must be trained; thoroughly, I mean. We must do our best for her."

The "we" amused me and – yes, I confess it – nettled me a little.

"Don't worry about that," I said, and more dryly than I had meant to; "I'm combing the country now for a suitable governess."

"Governess!" Phil snorted. "You don't want a governess for Susan. You want, for this job," he insisted, "a male intellect – a vigorous, disciplined male intellect. Music, dancing, water colors – pshaw! Deportment – how to enter a drawing-room! Fiddle-faddle! How to enter the Kingdom of God! That's more Susan's style," cried Phil, with a most unaccustomed heat.

I laughed at him.

"Are you willing to take her on, Phil?" I asked. "I believe it's been done; Epicurus had a female pupil or two."

"I have taken her on," Phil replied, quite without resentment. "Hadn't you noticed it?"

"Yes," I said; "only, it's the other way round."

"I've been appropriated, is that it?"

"Yes; by Susan. We all have, Phil. That vampire child is simply draining us, my dear fellow."

"All right," said Phil, after a second's pause, "if she's a *spiritual* vampire, so much the better. Only, she'll need a firm hand. We must give her suck at regular hours; draw up a plan. You can tackle the languages, if you like – æsthetics, and all that. I'll pin her down to math and logic – teach her to *think* straight. We can safely leave her to pick up history and sociology and such things for herself. You've a middling good library, and she'll browse."

"Oh, she'll browse! She's browsing now."

"Poetry?" demanded Phil, suspicion in his tone, anxiety in his eyes. "If she runs amuck with poetry too soon, there's no hope for her. She'll get to taking sensations for ideas, and that's fatal. A mind like Susan's – "

What further he said I missed; a distant tinkle from the front-door bell had distracted me.

It was Maltby Phar. He came out to us on the garden terrace, unexpected and unannounced.

"Whether you like it or not," he sighed luxuriously, "I'm here for a week. How's the great experiment – eh? Am I too late for the bust-up?" Then he nodded to Phil. "How are you, Mr. Farmer? Delighted to meet an old adversary! Shall it be swords or pistols this time? Or clubs? But I warn you,

I'm no fit foe; I'm soft. Making up our mammoth Christmas Number in July always unnerves me. By the time I had looked over a dozen designs for our cover this morning and found Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar in every one of them, mounted on fancy camels, and heading for an exaggerated star in the right upper dark-blue corner, I succumbed to heat and profanity, turned 'em all face downward, shuffled 'em, grabbed one at random, and then fled for solace! Solace," he added, dropping into a wicker armchair, "can begin, if you like, by taking a cool, mellow, liquid form."

I rang.

Phil, I saw, was looking annoyed. He disliked Maltby Phar, openly disliked him; so I felt certain – I was perhaps rather hoping – that he would take this opportunity to escape. With Phil I was never then entirely at ease; but in those days I was wholly so with Maltby. Miss Goucher answered my summons in person, and I suggested a sauterne cup for my friends. Phil frowned on the suggestion, but Maltby beamed. The ayes had it, and Miss Goucher, who had remained neutral, withdrew. It was Phil's chance; yet he surprised me by settling back and refilling his pipe.

"When you came, Mr. Phar," he said, his tone withdrawing toward formality, "we were discussing the education of Susan."

"Then I came just in time!" cried Maltby.

"For what?" I queried.

"I may prevent a catastrophe. If you're really going to see this thing through, Boz" – his name for me – "for God's sake do a little clear thinking first! Don't drift. Don't flounder. Don't wallow. Scrap all your musty, inbred prejudices once for all, and see that at least one kid on this filthy old planet gets a plain, honest, unsentimentalized account of what she is and what the world is. If you can bring yourself to do that, Susan will be unique. She will be the first educated woman in America."

"'What she is and what the world is,'" repeated Phil, slowly. "What is the world, may I ask? And what is Susan?"

There was a felt tenseness in the moment; the hush before battle. We leaned forward a little from our easy-chairs, and no one of us noticed that Susan had slipped noiselessly to the window seat by the opened library window which gave upon the terrace. But there, as we later discovered, she was; and there, for the present silently, she remained.

"The world," began Maltby Phar sententiously, "is a pigsty."

"Very well," interrupted Phil; "I'll grant you that to start with. What follows?"

"What we see about us," said Maltby.

"And what do we see?" asked Phil.

At this inopportune moment Miss Goucher reappeared, bearing a Sheffield tray, on which stood three antique Venetian goblets, and a tall pitcher of rare Bohemian glass, filled to the brim with an iced sauterne cup garnished with fresh strawberries and thin disks of pineapple. Nothing less suggestive of the conventional back-lot piggery could have been imagined. By the time a table had been placed, our goblets filled, and Miss Goucher had retired, Maltby had decided to try for a new opening.

"Excellent!" he resumed, having drained and refilled his goblet. "Now, Mr. Farmer, if you really wish to know what the world is, and what Susan is, I am ready. Have with you! And by the way, Boz," he interjected, sipping his wine, "your new housekeeper is one in a thousand. Mrs. Parrot was admirable; I've been absurdly regretting her loss. But Mrs. Parrot never quite rose to *this!*"

Phil's tongue clicked an impatient protest against the roof of his mouth. "I am still unenlightened, Mr. Phar."

"True," said Maltby. "That's the worst of you romantic idealists. It's your permanent condition." He settled back in his chair, and fell to his old trick of slowly caressing the back of his left hand with the palm of his right. "The world, my dear Mr. Farmer," he continued, "the universe, indeed, as we have come gradually to know it, is an infinity of blindly clashing forces. They have always existed, they will always exist; they have always been blind, and they always will be. Anything may happen in such an infinity, and we – this world of men and microbes – are one of the things which

has temporarily happened. It's regrettable, but it is so. And though there is nothing final we can do about it, and very little in any sense, still – this curious accident of the human intellect enables us to do something. We can at least admit the plain facts of our horrible case. Here, a self-realizing accident, we briefly are. Death will dissipate us one by one, and the world in due time. That much we know. But while we last, why must we add imaginary evils to our real ones, and torment ourselves with false hopes and ridiculous fears?

"Why can't each one of us learn to say: 'I am an accident of no consequence in a world that means nothing. I might be a stone, but I happen to be a man. Hence, certain things give me pleasure, others pain. And, obviously, in an accidental, meaningless world I can owe no duty to anyone but myself. I owe it to myself to get as much pleasure and to avoid as much pain as possible. Unswerving egotism should be my law.'" He paused to sip again, with a side glance toward Phil.

"Elementary, all this, I admit. I apologize for restating it to a scholar. But such are the facts as science reveals them – are they not? You have to try somehow to go beyond science to get round them. And where do you go – you romantic idealists? Where *can* you go? Nowhere outside of yourselves, I take it. So you plunge, perforce, down below the threshold of reason into a mad chaos of instinct and desire and dream. And what *there* do you find? Bugaboos, my dear sir, simply bugaboos: divine orders, hells, heavens, purgatories, moral sanctions – all the wild insanity, in two words, that had made our wretched lives even less worth living than they could and should be!"

"*Should?* Why *should?*" asked Phil. "Granting your universe, who gives a negligible damn for a little discomfort more or less?"

"I do!" Maltby asserted. "I want all the comfort I can get; and I could get far more in a world of clear-seeing, secular egotists than I can in this mixed mess of superstitious, sentimental idealists which we choose to call civilized society! Take just one minor practical illustration: Say that some virgin has wakened my desire, and I hers. In a reasonable society we could give each other a certain amount of passing satisfaction. But do we do it? No. The virgin has been taught to believe in a mystical, mischievous something, called Purity! To follow her natural instinct would be a sin. If you sin and get caught on earth, society will punish you; and if you don't get caught here, you'll infallibly get caught hereafter – and then God will punish you. So the virgin tortures herself and tortures me – unless I'm willing to marry her, which would be certain to prove the worst of tortures for us both. And there you are."

It was at this point that Susan spoke from her window.

"Pearl and papa weren't married, Mr. Phar; but they didn't get much fun out of not being."

I confess that I felt a nervous chill start at the base of my spine and shiver up toward my scalp. Even Phil, the man of Indian gravity, looked for an instant perturbed.

"Susan!" I demanded sharply. "Have you been listening?"

"Mustn't I listen?" asked Susan. "Why not? Are you cross, Ambo?"

"The mischief's done," said Phil to me quietly; "better not make a point of it."

"Please don't be cross, Ambo," Susan pleaded, slipping through the window to the terrace and coming straight over to me. "Mr. Phar feels just the way papa did about things; only papa couldn't talk so splendidly. He had a very poor vocabulary" – "Vocabulary!" I gasped – "except nasty words and swearing. But he meant just what Mr. Phar means, *inside*."

Phil, as she ended, began to make strange choking noises and retired suddenly into his handkerchief. Maltby put down his glass and stared at Susan.

"Young person," he finally said, "you ought to be spanked! Don't you know it's an unforgivable sin to spy on your elders!"

"But you don't believe in sin," responded Susan calmly, without the tiniest suspicion of pertness in her tone or bearing. "You believe in doing what you want to. *I* wanted to hear what you were saying, Mr. Phar."

"Of course you did!" Phil struck in. "But next time, Susan, as a concession to good manners, you might let us know you're in the neighborhood – ?"

Susan bit her lower lip very hard before she managed to reply.

"Yes. I will next time. I'm sorry, Phil." (*Phil!*) Then she turned to Maltby. "But I wasn't spying! I just didn't know you would any of you mind."

"We don't, really," I said. "Sit down, dear. You're always welcome." I had been doing some stiff, concentrated thinking in the last three minutes, and now I had taken the plunge. "The truth is, Susan," I went on, "that most children who live in good homes, who are what is called 'well brought up,' are carefully sheltered from any facts or words or thoughts which their parents do not consider wholesome or pleasant. Parents try to give their children only what they have found to be best in life; they try to keep them in ignorance of everything else."

"But they can't," said Susan. "At least, they couldn't in Birch Street."

"No. Nor elsewhere. But they try. And they always make believe to themselves that they have succeeded. So it's supposed to be very shocking and dangerous for a girl of your age to listen to the free conversation of men of our age. That's the reason we all felt a little guilty, at first, when we found you'd been overhearing us."

"How funny," said Susan. "Papa never cared."

"Good for him!" exclaimed Maltby. "I didn't feel guilty, for one! I refuse to be convicted of so hypocritically squeamish a reaction!"

"Oh!" Susan sighed, almost with rapture. "You know such a lot of words, Mr. Phar! You can say anything."

"Thanks," said Maltby; "I rather flatter myself that I can."

"And you *do!*" grunted Phil. "But words," he took up the dropped threads rather awkwardly, "are nothing in themselves, Susan. You are too fond of mere words. It isn't words that matter; it's ideas."

"Yes, Phil," said Susan meekly, "but I love words – best of all when they're pictures."

Phil frowned, without visible effect upon Susan. I saw that her mind had gone elsewhere.

"Ambo?"

"Yes, dear?"

"You mustn't ever worry about me, Ambo. My hearing or knowing things – or saying them. I – I guess I'm different."

Maltby's face was a study in suppressed amazement; Phil was still frowning. It was all too much for me, and I laughed – laughed from the lower ribs!

Susan laughed with me, springing from her chair to throw her arms tightly round my neck in one big joyous suffocating hug!

"Oh, Ambo!" she cried, breathless. "Isn't it going to be fun – all of us – together – now we can *talk!*"

VI

The following evening, after dinner, Maltby Phar, still a little ruffled by Susan's unexpected vivacities of the night before, retired to the library with pipe and book, and Susan and I sat alone together on the garden terrace. It was dusk. The heavy air of the past week had been quickened and purified by an afternoon thunderstorm. Little cool puffs came to us across a bed of glimmering white phlox, bearing with them its peculiar, loamy fragrance. Smoke from my excellent cigarette eddied now and then toward Susan.

Silence had stolen upon her as the afterglow faded, revealing the first patient stars. Already I had learned to respect Susan's silences. She was not, in the usual sense of uncertain temper, of nervous irritability, a moody child; yet she had her moods – moods, if I may put it so, of extraordinary definition. There were hours, not too frequent to be disturbing, when she *withdrew;* there is no better word for it. At such times her thin, alert little frame was motionless; she would sit as if holding a pose for a portrait, her chin a trifle lifted, her eyes focusing on no visible object, her hands lying – always with the palms upward – in her lap. I supposed that now, with the veiled yet sharply scented dusk, such a mood had crept upon her. But for once I was mistaken. Susan, this time, had not withdrawn; she was intensely aware.

"Ambo" – the suddenness with which she spoke startled me – "you ought to have lots of children. You ought to have a boy, anyway; not just a girl."

"A boy? Why, dear? Are you lonely?"

"Of course not; with you – and Phil!"

"Then whatever in the world put such a crazy – "

Susan interrupted; a bad habit of hers, never subsequently broken, and due, doubtless, to an instinctive impatience of foreseeable remarks.

"You're so awfully rich, Ambo. You could have dozens and not feel it – except that they'd get in your way sometimes and make your outside cross. But two wouldn't be much more trouble than one. It might seem a little crowded – at first; but after while, Ambo, you'd hardly notice it."

"Possibly. Still – nice boys don't grow on bushes, Susan. Not the kind of brothers I should have to insist upon for you!"

"I'm not so fussy as all that," said Susan. "And it isn't fair that I should have everything. Besides, Ambo, boys are much nicer than girls. Honestly they are."

"Oh, are they! I'm afraid you haven't had much experience with boys! Most of them are disgusting young savages. Really, Susan! Their hands and feet are too big for them, and their voices don't fit. They're always breaking things – irreplaceable things for choice, and raising the devil of a row. Take my word for it, dear, please. I'm an ex-boy myself; I know all about 'em! They were never created for civilized human companionship. Why, I'd rather give you a young grizzly bear and be done with it, than present you with the common-or-garden brother! But if you'd like a nice quiet little sister some day, maybe – "

"I wouldn't," said Susan.

She was silent again for several moments, pondering. I observed her furtively. Nothing was more distant from my desire than any addition, of any age, male or female, to my present family. Heaven, in its great and unwonted kindness, had sent me Susan; she was – to my thinking – perfect; and she was enough. Whether in art or in life I am no lover of an avoidable anticlimax. But Susan's secret purposes were not mine.

"Ambo," she resumed, "I guess if you'd ever lived in Birch Street you'd feel differently about boys."

"I doubt it, Susan."

"I'm sure you'd feel differently about Jimmy."

"Jimmy?"

"Jimmy Kane, Ambo —*my* Jimmy. Haven't I ever told you about him?"

Guilefully, persuasively, she edged her chair nearer to mine.

It was then that I first learned of Jimmy's battle for Susan, of the bloody but righteous downfall of Giuseppe Gonfarone, and of many another incident long treasured in the junior annals of Birch Street. Thus, little by little, though the night deepened about us, my eyes were unsealed. What a small world I had always lived in! For how long had it seemed to me that romance was – approximately – dead! My fingers tightened on Susan's, while the much-interrogated stars hung above us in their mysterious orbits and – But no, that is the pathetic fallacy. Stars – are they not matter, merely? They could not smile.

"Don't you truly think, Ambo," suggested Susan, "that Jimmy ought to have a better chance? If he doesn't get it, he'll have to work in a factory all his life. And here I am – with you!"

"Yes. But consider, Susan – there are thousands of boys like Jimmy. I can't father them all, you know."

"I don't want you to father them all," said Susan; "and there isn't anybody like Jimmy! You'll see."

It came over me as she spoke that I was, however unwillingly, predestined to see.

Maltby Phar thought otherwise. That night, after Susan had gone up to bed, I talked the thing over with him – trying for an airy, detached tone; the tone of one who discusses an indifferent matter for want of a more urgent. Maltby was not, I fear, deceived.

"My dear Boz," he pleaded, "buck up! Get a fresh grip on your individuality and haul it back from the brink of destruction! If you don't, that little she-demon above-stairs will push it over into the gulf, once for all! You'll be nobody. You'll be her dupe – her slave. How can you smile, man! I'm quite serious, and I warn you. Fight the good fight! Defend the supreme rights of your ego, before it's too late!"

"Why these tragic accents?" I parried. "It's not likely the washlady's kid would want to come; or his mother let him. Susan idealizes him, of course. He's probably quite commonplace and content as he is. No harm, though, if it pleases Susan, in looking him over?"

Maltby took up his book again. He dismissed me. "Whom the gods destroy – " he muttered, and ostentatiously turned a page.

VII

My feeling that I was predestined to see, with Susan, that there wasn't anybody like Jimmy – that I was further predestined to take him into my heart and home – proved, very much to my own surprise and to the disappointment of Susan, to be unjustified. This was the first bitter defeat that Susan had been called upon to bear since leaving Birch Street. She took it quietly, but deeply, which troubled my private sense of relief, and indeed turned it into something very like regret. The simple fact was that much had happened in Birch Street since the tragedy of the four-room house; life had not stood still there; chance and change – deaths and marriages and births – had altered the circumstances of whole families. In short, that steady flux of mortality, which respects neither the dignity of the Hillhouse Avenues nor the obscurity of the Birch Streets of the world, had in its secret courses already borne Jimmy Kane – elsewhere. Precisely where, even his mother did not know; and first and last it was her entire and passionate ignorance as to Jimmy's present location which foiled us. "West" is a geographical expression certainly, but it is not an address.

Jimmy's mother lived with her unwashed brood, you will remember, above old Heinze's grocery store, and on the following afternoon I ran Susan over there for a tactful reconnaissance. At Susan's request we went slowly along Birch Street from its extreme right end to its ultimate wrong, crossing the waste land and general dump at the base of East Rock – historic ground! – mounting the long incline beyond, and so passing the four-room house, which now seemed to be occupied by at least three families of that hardy, prolific race discourteously known to young America as "wops." Throughout this little tour Susan withdrew, and I respected her silence. She had not yet spoken when we stopped at Heinze's corner and descended.

Here first it was that forebodings of chance and change met us upon the pavement, in the person of old Heinze himself, standing melancholy and pensive before the screened doorway of his domain. Him Susan accosted. He did not at first recognize her, but recollection returned to him as she spoke.

"*Ach*, so!" he exclaimed, peering with mildest surprise above steel-rimmed spectacles. "Id iss you – nod? Leedle Susanna!"

My formal introduction followed; nor was it without a glow of satisfaction that I heard old Heinze assure me that he had read certain of my occasional essays with attention and respect. "Ard for ard – yah! Dot iss your credo," he informed me, with tranquil noddings of his bumpy, oddly shaped skull. "Dot iss der credo of all arisdograds. Id iss nod mine."

But Susan was in no mood for general ideas; she descended at once to particulars, and announced that we were going up to see Mrs. Kane. Then old Heinze snaggily, and I thought rather wearily, smiled.

"*Aber*," he objected, lifting twisted, rheumatic hands, "dere iss no more such a vooman! Alretty, leedle Susanna, I haf peen an oldt fool like oders. I haf made her my vife." And though he continued to smile, he also sighed.

Our ensuing interview with Frau Heinze, formerly the Widow Kane, fully interpreted this sigh. Prosperity, Susan later assured me, had not improved her. She greeted us, above the shop, in her small, shiny, colored lithograph of a parlor, with unveiled suspicion. Her eyes were hostile. She seemed to take it for granted, did Mrs. Heinze, that we could have no kindly purpose in intruding upon her. A dumpy, grumpy little woman, with the parboiled hands and complexion of long years at the wash-tubs, her present state of comparative freedom from bondage had not lightened her heart. Her irritability, I told Susan after our escape, was doubtless due to the fact that she could not share in old Heinze's intellectual and literary tastes. Susan laughed.

"She wouldn't bother much about that; Birch Street's never lonely, and it's only a step to the State Street movies. No; I think it's corsets."

Corsets? The word threw a flood of light. I saw at once that it must be a strain upon any disposition to return after a long and figureless widowhood to the steel, buckram, and rebellious curves of conventional married life. I remembered the harnesslike creaking of Mrs. Heinze's waistline, and forgave her much.

There was really a good deal to forgive. It was neither Susan's fault nor mine that turned our call into a bad quarter of an hour. I had looked for a pretty scene as I mounted the stairs behind Susan. I had pictured the child, in her gay summer frock, bursting like sunshine into Mrs. Heinze's stuffy quarters – and so forth. Nothing of the kind occurred.

"Who is ut?" demanded Mrs. Heinze, peering forth. "Oh, it's you – Bob Blake's girl. What do you want?" Susan explained. "Well, come in then," said Mrs. Heinze.

Susan, less daunted than I by her reception, marched in and asked at once for Jimmy. At the sound of his name Mrs. Heinze's suspicions were sharply focused. If the gentleman knew anything about Jimmy, all right, let him say so! It wouldn't surprise her to hear he'd been gettin' himself into trouble! It would surprise her much more, she implied, if he had not. But if he had, she couldn't be responsible – nor Heinze either, the poor man! Jimmy was sixteen – a man grown, you might say. Let him look after himself, then; and more shame to him for the way he'd acted!

But what way he had acted, and why, Susan at first found it difficult to determine.

"Oh!" she at length protested, following cloudy suggestions of evil courses. "Jimmy couldn't do anything mean! You know he couldn't. It isn't in him!"

"Isn't ut indeed! Me slavin' for him and the childer ever since Kane was took off sudden – and not a cint saved for the livin' – let alone the dead! Slavin' and worritin' – the way you'd think Jimmy'd 'a' jumped wid joy when Heinze offered! And an easier man not to be found – though he's got his notions. What man hasn't? If it's not one thing, it's another. 'Except his beer, he don't drink much,' I says to Jimmy; 'and that's more than I could say for your own father, rest his soul!' 'My father wasn't a Dutchman,' Jimmy says; givin' me his lip to me face. 'He didn't talk out against the Pope,' he says. 'Nor the Pris'dint,' he says. 'He wasn't a stinkin' Socialist,' he says – usin' them very words! 'No,' I says, 'he was a Demycrat – and what's ut to you? All men'll be blatherin' polytics after hours,' I says. 'Heinze manes no harm by ut, no more nor the rest. 'Tis just his talk,' I says. And after that we had more words, and I laid me palm to his head."

"Oh!" cried Susan.

"I'll not take lip from a son of mine, Susan Blake; nor from you, wid all your grand clothes! I've seen you too often lackin' a modest stitch to your back!"

I hastened to intervene.

"We'll not trouble you longer, Mrs. Heinze, if you'll only be good enough to tell me where Jimmy is now. He was very kind to Susan once, and she wants to thank him in some way. I've a proposition to make him – which might be to his advantage."

"Oh – so that's ut at last! Well, Susan Blake, you've had the grand luck for the likes of you! But you're too late. Jimmy's gone."

"Gone?"

"'Tis the gratitude I get for raisin' him! Gone he is, wid what he'd laid by – twinty-sivin dollars – and no word to nobody. There's a son for ye!"

"But – oh, Mrs. Heinze – gone *where?*"

"West. That's all I know," said Mrs. Heinze. "He left a line to say he'd gone West. We've not had a scrap from him since. If he comes to a bad end – "

"Jimmy won't come to a bad end!" struck in Susan sharply. "He did just right to leave you. Good-by." With that she seized my arm and swept me with her from the room.

"Glory be to God! Susan Blake – the airs of her now!" followed us shrilly, satirically, down the stairs.

VIII

Maltby's visit came to an end, and for the first time I did not regret his departure. For some reason, which perhaps purposely I left unanalyzed, Maltby was beginning to get a trifle on my nerves. But let that pass. Once he was gone, Phil Farmer drew a long breath and plunged with characteristic thoroughness into his comprehensive scheme for the education of Susan. Her enthusiasm for this scheme was no less contagious than his own, and I soon found myself yielding to her wish to stay on in New Haven through the summer, and let in for daily lessons at regular hours – very much to my astonishment, the rôle of schoolmaster being one which I had always flattered myself I was temperamentally unfitted to sustain.

I soon discovered, however, that teaching a mentally alert, whimsically unexpected, stubbornly diligent, and always grateful pupil is among the most stimulating and delightful of human occupations. My own psychic laziness, which had been long creeping upon me, vanished in this new atmosphere of competition – competition, for that is what it came to, with the unwearying Phil. It was a real renascence for me. Forsaken gods! how I studied – off hours and on the sly! My French was excellent, my Italian fair; but my small Latin and less Greek needed endless attention. Yet I rather preen myself upon my success; though Phil has always maintained that I overfed Susan with æsthetic flummery, thus dulling the edge of her appetite for his own more wholesome daily bread.

In one respect, at least, I disagreed fundamentally with Phil, and here – through sheer force of conviction – I triumphed. Phil, who lived exclusively in things of the mind, would have turned this sensitive child into a bemused scholar, a female bookworm. This, simply, I would not and did not permit. If she had a soul, she had a body, too, and I was determined that it should be a vigorous, happy body before all else. For her sake solely – for I am too easily an indolent man – I took up riding again, and tennis, and even pushed myself into golf; with the result that my nervous dyspepsia vanished, and my irritability along with it; with the more excellent result that Susan filled and bloomed and ate (for her) three really astonishing meals a day.

It was a busy life – a wonderful life! Hard work – hard play – fun – travel… Ah, those years!

But I am leaping ahead – !

Yet I have but one incident left to record of those earliest days with Susan – an incident which had important, though delayed, results – affecting in various ways, for long unforeseen, Susan's career, and the destiny of several other persons, myself among them.

Sonia, Susan's little Russian maid, was at the bottom of it all; and the first hint of the rather sordid affair came to me, all unprepared, from the lips of Miss Goucher. She sought me out in my private study, whither I had retired after dinner to write a letter or two – a most unusual proceeding on her part, and on mine – and she asked at once in her brief, hard, respectful manner for ten minutes of my time. I rose and placed a chair for her, uncomfortably certain that this could be no trivial errand; she seated herself, angularly erect, holding her feelings well in hand.

"Mr. Hunt," she began, "have I your permission to discharge Sonia?"

My face showed my surprise.

"But Susan likes her, doesn't she, Miss Goucher? And she seems efficient?"

"Yes. A little careless perhaps; but then, she's young. It isn't her service I object to."

"What is the trouble?"

"It is a question of character, Mr. Hunt. I have reason to think her lacking in – self-respect."

"You mean – immoral?" I asked, using the word in the restricted sense which I assumed Miss Goucher, like most maiden ladies, exclusively attached to it. To my astonishment Miss Goucher insisted upon more definition.

"No, I shouldn't say that. She tells a good many little fibs, but she's not at heart dishonest. And I'm by no means certain she can be held responsible for her weakness in respect to men." A slight

flush just tinged Miss Goucher's prominent cheek bones; but duty was duty, and she persevered. "She has a bad inheritance, I think; and until she came here, Mr. Hunt, her environment was always – unfortunate. If it were not for Susan, I shouldn't have spoken. I should have felt it my duty to try to protect the child and – However," added Miss Goucher, "I doubt whether much can be done for Sonia. So my first duty is certainly to Miss Susan, and to you."

Susan's quiet admiration for Miss Goucher had more or less puzzled me hitherto, but now my own opinion of Miss Goucher soared heavenward. Why, the woman was remarkable – far more so than I had remotely suspected! She had a mind above her station, respectable though her station might well be held to be.

"My dear Miss Goucher," I exclaimed, "it is perfectly evident to me that my interests are more than safe in your keeping. Do what you think best, by all means!"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hunt," said Miss Goucher, "that is what I cannot do."

"May I ask why?"

"Society would not permit me," answered Miss Goucher.

"Please explain," I gasped.

"Sonia will cause a great deal of suffering in the world," said Miss Goucher, the color on her cheek bones deepening, while she avoided my glance. "For herself – and others. In my opinion – which I am aware is not widely shared – she should be placed in a lethal chamber and painlessly removed. We are learning to 'swat the fly,'" continued Miss Goucher, "because it benefits no one and spreads many human ills. Some day we shall learn to swat – other things." Calmly she rose to take her leave. Excitedly eager, I sprang up to detain her.

"Don't go, Miss Goucher! Your views are really most interesting – though, as you say, not widely accepted. Certainly not by me. Your plan of a lethal chamber for weak sisters and brothers strikes me as – well, drastic. Do sit down."

Again Miss Goucher perched primly upright on the outer edge of the chair beside my own. "I felt bound to state my views truthfully," she said, "since you asked for them. But I never intrude them upon others. I'm not a social rebel, Mr. Hunt. I lack self-confidence for that. When I differ from the received opinion I always suspect that I am quite wrong. Probably I am in this case. But I think society would agree with me that Sonia is not a fit maid for Susan."

"Beyond a shadow of doubt," I assented. "But may I ask on what grounds you suspect Sonia?"

"It is certainly your right," replied Miss Goucher; "but if you insist upon an answer I shall have to give notice."

"Then I shall certainly not insist."

"Thank you, Mr. Hunt," said Miss Goucher, rising once more. "I appreciate this." And she walked from the room.

It was the next afternoon that Susan burst into my study without knocking – a breach of manners which she had recently learned to conquer, so the irruption surprised me. But I noted instantly that Susan's agitation had carried her far beyond all thought for trifles. Never had I seen her like this. Her whole being was vibrant with emotional stress.

"Ambo!" she cried, all but slamming the door behind her. "Sonia mustn't go! I won't let her go! You and Miss Goucher may think what you please – I won't, Ambo! It's wicked! You don't want Sonia to be like Tilly Jaretski, do you?"

"Like Tilly Jaretski?" My astonishment was so great that I babbled the unfamiliar name merely to gain time, collect my senses.

"Yes!" urged Susan, almost leaping to my side, and seizing my arm with tense fingers. "She'll be just like Tilly was, along State Street – after her baby came. Tilly wasn't a bit like Pearl, Ambo; and Sonia isn't either! But she's going to have a baby, too, Ambo, like Tilly."

With a wrench of my entire nervous system I, in one agonizing second, completely dislocated the prejudices of a lifetime, and rose to the situation confronting me. O Hillhouse Avenue, right at

both ends! How little you had prepared me for this precocious knowledge of life – knowledge that utterly degrades or most wonderfully saves – which these children, out toward the wrong end of the Birch Streets of the world, drink in almost with their mothers' milk! How far I, a grown man – a cultured, sophisticated man – must travel, Susan, even to begin to equal your simple acceptance of naked, ugly fact – sheer fact – seen, smelt, heard, tasted! How far – how far!

"Susan," I said gravely, "does Miss Goucher know about Sonia?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. I haven't seen her yet. When Sonia came to me, crying – I ran straight in here!"

"And how long have *you* known?"

"Over a week. Sonia told me all about it, Ambo. Count Dimbrovitski got her in trouble. She loved him, Ambo – her way. She doesn't any more. Sonia can't love anybody long; he can't, either. That's why his wife sent Sonia off. Sonia says she knows her husband's like that, but so long as she can hush things up, she doesn't care. Sonia says she has a lover herself, and Count Dim doesn't care much either. Oh, Ambo – how *stuffy* some people are! I don't mean Sonia. She's just pitiful – like Tilly. But those others – they're different – I can feel it! Oh, how *Artemis* must hate them, Ambo!"

Susan's tense fingers relaxed, slipping from my arm; she slid down to the floor, huddled, and leaning against the padded side of my chair buried her face in her hands.

Very quietly I rose, not to disturb her, and crossing to the interphone requested Miss Goucher's presence. My thoughts raced crazily on. In advance of Miss Goucher's coming I had dramatized my interview with her in seven different and unsatisfactory ways. When she at last entered, my temple pulses were beating and my tongue was stiff and dry. Susan, except for her shaken shoulders, had not stirred.

"Miss Goucher," I managed to begin, "shut the door, please… You see this poor child – ?"

Miss Goucher saw. Over her harsh, positive features fell a sort of transforming veil. It seemed to me suddenly – if for that moment only – that Miss Goucher was very beautiful.

"If you wouldn't mind," she suggested, "leaving her with me?"

Well, I had not in advance dramatized our meeting in this way. In all the seven scenes that had flashed through me, I had stood, an unquestioned star, at the center of the stage. I had not foreseen an exit. But I most humbly and gratefully accepted one now.

Precisely what took place, what words were said there, in my study, following my humble exit, I have never learned, either from Miss Goucher or from Susan. I know only that from that hour forth the bond between them became what sentimentalists fondly suppose the relationship between mother and daughter must always be – what, alas, it so rarely, but then so beautifully, is.

I date from that hour Miss Goucher's abandonment of her predilection for the lethal chamber; at least, she never spoke of it again. And Sonia stayed with us. Her boy was born in my house, and there for three happy years was nourished and shamelessly spoiled; at the end of which time Sonia found a husband in the person of young Jack Palumbo, unquestionably the pick of all our Hillhouse Avenue chauffeurs. Their marriage caused a brief scandal in the neighborhood, but was soon accepted as an authentic and successful fact.

Chance and change are not always villains, you observe; the temperamental Sonia has grown stout and placid, and has increased the world's legitimate population by three. Nevertheless, it is the consensus of opinion that little Ivan, her first-born, is the golden arrow in her quiver – an opinion in which Jack Palumbo delightedly, if rather surprisingly, concurs.

And so much for Sonia… Let the curtain quietly descend. When it rises again, six years will have passed; good years – and therefore unrecorded. Your scribe, Susan, is now nearing forty; and you – Great heavens, is it possible! Can you be "going on" – twenty?

Yes, dear – You are.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

I

IT was October; the year, 1913. Susan, Miss Goucher and I had just returned from Liverpool on the good ship "Lusitania" – there was a good ship "Lusitania" in those days – after a delightful summer spent in Italy and France. Susan and I entirely agree that the season for Italy is midsummer. Italy is not Italy until she has drunk deep of the sun; until a haze of whitest dust floats up from the slow hoofs of her white oxen along Umbrian or Tuscan roads. You will never get from her churches all they can give unless they have been to you as shadows of great rocks in a weary land. To step from reverberating glare to vast cool dimness – ah, that is to know at last the meaning of sanctuary!

But to step from a North River pier into a cynical taxi, solely energized by our great American principle of "Take a chance!" – to be bumped and slithered by that energizing principle across the main traffic streams of impatient New York – that is to reawaken to all the doubt and distraction, the implacable multiplicity of a scientifically disordered world!

New Haven was better; Hillhouse Avenue preserving especially – through valorous prodigies of rejection – much of its ancient, slightly disdainful, studiously inconspicuous calm.

Phil Farmer was waiting for us at the doorstep. For all his inclusive greeting, his warm, welcoming smile, he looked older, did Phil, leaner somehow, more finely drawn. There was a something hungry about him – something in his eyes. But if Susan, who notices most things, noted it, she did not speak of her impression to me. She almost hugged Phil as she jumped out to greet him and dragged him with her up the steps to the door.

And now, if this portion of Susan's history is to be truthfully recorded, certain facts may as well be set down at once, clearly, in due order, without shame.

1. Phil Farmer was, by this time, hopelessly in love with Susan.
2. So was Maltby Phar.
3. So was I.

It should now be possible for a modest but intelligent reader to follow the approaching pages without undue fatigue.

II

Susan never kept a diary, she tells me, but she had, like most beginning authors, the habit of scribbling things down, which she never intended to keep, and then could seldom bring herself to destroy. To a writer all that his pen leaves behind it seems sacred; it is, I treacherously submit, a private grief to any of us to blot a line. Such is our vanity. However inept the work which we force ourselves or are prevailed upon to destroy, the unhappy doubt always lingers: "If I had only saved it? One can't be sure? Perhaps posterity – ?"

Susan, thank God, was not and probably is not exempt from this folly. It enables me from this time forward to present certain passages – mere scraps and jottings – from her notebooks, which she has not hesitated to turn over to me.

"I don't approve, Ambo," was her comment, "but if you *will* write nonsense about me, I can't help it. What I can help, a little, is your writing nonsense about yourself or Phil or the rest. It's only fair to let me get a word in edgeways, now and then – if only for your sake and theirs."

That is not, however, my own reason for giving you occasional peeps into these notebooks of Susan's.

"I'm beginning to wish that Shelley might have had a sense of humor. 'Epipsychidion' is really too absurd. 'Sweet benediction in the eternal curse!' Imagine, under any condition of sanity, calling any woman that! Or 'Thou star above the storm!' – beautiful as the image is. 'Thou storm upon the star!' would make much worse poetry, but much better sense… Isn't it strange that I can't feel this about Wordsworth? He was better off without humor, for all his solemn-donkey spots – and it's better for us that he didn't have it. It's probably better for us, too, that Shelley didn't have it – but it wasn't better for *him*. Diddle-diddle-dumpling – what stuff all this is! Go to bed, Susan."

"There's no use pretending things are different, Susan Blake; you might as well face them and see them through, open-eyed. What does being in love mean?

"I suppose if one is really in love, head over heels, one doesn't care what it means. But I don't like pouncing, overwhelming things – things that crush and blast and scorch and blind. I don't like cyclones and earthquakes and conflagrations – at least, I've never experienced any, but I know I shouldn't like them if I did. But I don't think I'd be so terribly afraid of them – though I might. I think I'd be more – sort of – indignant – disgusted."

Editor's Note: Such English! But pungent stylist as Susan is now acknowledged to be, she is still, in the opinion of academic critics, not sufficiently attentive to formal niceties of diction. She remains too wayward, too impressionistic; in a word, too personal. I am inclined to agree, and yet – am I?

"It's all very well to stamp round declaiming that you're captain of your soul, but if an earthquake – even a tiny one – comes and shakes your house like a dice box and then scatters you and the family out of it like dice – it wouldn't sound very appropriate for your epitaph. 'I am the master of my fate' would always look silly on a tombstone. Why aren't tombstones a good test for poetry – some poetry? I've never seen anything on a tombstone that looked real – not even the names and dates.

"But *does* love have to be like an earthquake? If it does, then it's just a blind force, and I don't like blind forces. It's stupid to be blind oneself; but it's worse to have blind stupid things butting into one and pushing one about.

"Hang it, I don't believe love has to be stupid and blind, and go thrashing through things! Ambo isn't thrashing through things – or Phil either. But, of course, they wouldn't. That's exactly what I mean about love; it can be tamed, civilized. No, not civilized – just tamed. *Cowed?* Then it's still as wild as ever underneath? I'm afraid it is. Oh, dear!

"Phil and Ambo really are captains of their souls though, so far as things in general let them be. *Things in general*– what a funny name for God! But isn't God just a short solemn name for things in

general? There I go again. Phil says I'm always taking God's name in vain. He thinks I lack reverence. I don't, really. What I lack is – reticence. That's different – isn't it, Ambo?"

The above extracts date back a little. The following were jotted early in November, 1913, not long after our return from overseas.

"This is growing serious, Susan Blake. Phil has asked you to marry him, and says he needs you. Ditto Maltby; only he says he wants you. Which, too obviously, he does. Poor Maltby – imagine his trying to stoop so low as matrimony, even to conquer! As for Ambo – Ambo says nothing, bless him – but I think he wants and needs you most of all. Well, Susan?"

"Jimmy's back. I saw him yesterday. He didn't know me."

"Sex is a miserable nuisance. It muddles things – interferes with honest human values. It's just Nature making fools of us for her own private ends. These are not pretty sentiments for a young girl, Susan Blake!"

"Speak up, Susan – clear the air! You are living here under false pretenses. If you can't manage to feel like Ambo's daughter – you oughtn't to stay."

III

It was perhaps when reticent Phil finally spoke to me of his love for Susan that I first fully realized my own predicament – a most unpleasant discovery; one which I determined should never interfere with Susan's peace of mind or with the possible chances of other, more eligible, men. As Susan's guardian, I could not for a moment countenance her receiving more than friendly attention from a man already married, and no longer young. A grim, confused hour in my study convinced me that I was an impossible, even an absurd, *parti*. This conviction brought with it pain so sharp, so nearly unendurable, that I wondered in my weakness how it was to be unflinchingly borne. Yet borne it must be, and without betrayal. It did not occur to me, in my mature folly, that I was already, and had for long been, self-betrayed.

"Steady, you old fool!" whispered my familiar demon. "This isn't going to be child's play, you know. This is an hour-by-hour torture you've set out to grin and bear and live through. You'll never make the grade, if you don't take cognizance in advance. The road's devilishly steep and icy, and the corners are bad. What's more, there's no end to it; the crest's never in sight. Clamp your chains on and get into low… Steady!

"But, of course," whispered my familiar demon, "there's probably an easier way round. Why attempt the impossible? Think what you've done for Susan! Gratitude, my dear sir – affectionate gratitude – is a long step in the right direction.. if it is the right direction. I don't say it is; I merely suggest, *en passant*, that it may be. Suppose, for example, that Susan – "

"Damn you!" I spat out, jumping from my chair. "You contemptible swine!"

Congested blood whined in my ears like a faint jeering laughter. I paced the room, raging – only to sink down again, exhausted, my face and hands clammy.

"What a hideous exhibition," I said, distinctly addressing a grotesque porcelain Buddha on the mantelpiece. Contrary, I believe, to my expectations, he did not reply. My familiar demon forestalled him.

"If by taking a merely conventional attitude," he murmured, "you defeat the natural flowering of two lives – ? Who are you to decide that the voice of Nature is not also the voice of God? Supposing, for the moment, that God is other than a poetic expression. If her eyes didn't haunt you," continued my familiar demon, "or a certain way she has of turning her head, like a poised poppy.."

As he droned on within me, the mantelpiece blurred and thinned to the blue haze of a distant Tuscan hill, and the little porcelain Buddha sat upon this hill, very far off now and changed oddly to the semblance of a tiny huddled town. We were climbing along a white road toward that far hill, that tiny town.

"Ambo," she was saying, "that isn't East Rock – it's Monte Senario. And this isn't Birch Street – it's the Faenzan Way. How do you do it, Ambo – you wonderful magician! Just with a wave of your wand you change the world for me; you give me – all this!"

A bee droned at my ear: "Gratitude, my dear sir. Affectionate gratitude. A long step."

"Damn you!" I whimpered… But the grotesque porcelain Buddha was there again, on the mantelshelf. The creases in his little fat belly disgusted me; they were loathsome. I rose. "At least," I said to him, "I can live without *you!*" Then I seized him and shattered him against the fireplace tiles. It was an enormous relief.

Followed a knock at my door that I answered calmly: "Who is it? Come in."

Miss Goucher never came to me without a mission; she had one now.

"Mr. Hunt," she said, "I should like to talk to you very plainly. May I? It's about Susan." I nodded. "Mr. Hunt," she continued resolutely, "Susan is in a very difficult position here. I don't say that she isn't entirely equal to meeting it; but I dread the nervous strain for her – if you understand?"

"Not entirely, Miss Goucher; perhaps, not at all."

"I was afraid of this," she responded unhappily. "But I must go on – for her sake."

Knowing well that Miss Goucher would face death smiling for Susan's sake, her repressed agitation alarmed me. "Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "Is there anything really wrong?"

"A good deal." She paused, her lips whitening as she knit them together, lest any ill-considered word should slip from her. Miss Goucher never loosed her arrows at random; she always tried for the bull's-eye, and usually with success.

"I am speaking in strict confidence – to Susan's protector and legal guardian. Please try to fill in what I leave unsaid. It is very unfortunate for Susan's peace of mind that you should happen to be a married man."

"For *her* peace of mind!"

"Yes."

"Wait! I daren't trust myself to fill in what you leave unsaid. It's too – preposterous. Do you mean – But you can't mean that you imagine Susan to be in love with – her grandfather?" My heart pounded, suffocating me; with fright, I think.

"No," said Miss Goucher, coldly; "Susan is not in love with her grandfather. She is with you."

I could manage no response but an angry one. "That's a dangerous statement, Miss Goucher! Whether true or not – it ruins everything. You have made our life here together impossible."

"It is impossible," said Miss Goucher. "It became so last summer. I knew then it could not go on much longer."

"But I question this! I deny that Susan feels for me more than – gratitude and affection."

"Gratitude is rare," said Miss Goucher enigmatically, her eyes fixed upon the fragments of Buddha littering my hearth. "True gratitude," she added, "is a strong emotion. When it passes between a man and a woman, it is like flame."

"Very interesting!" I snapped. "But hardly enough to have brought you here to me with this!"

"She feels that you need her," said Miss Goucher.

"I do," was my reply.

"Susan doesn't need *you*," said Miss Goucher. "I don't wish to be brutal; but she doesn't. In spite of this, she can easily stand alone."

"I see. And you think that would be best?"

"Naturally. Don't you?"

"I'm not so sure."

As I muttered this my eyes, too, fixed themselves on the fragments of Buddha. Would the woman never go! I hated her; it seemed to me now that I had always hated her. What was she after all but a superior kind of servant – presuming in this way! The irritation of these thoughts swung me suddenly round to wound her, if I might, with sarcasm, with implied contempt. But it is impossible to wound the air. With her customary economy of explanation Miss Goucher had, pitilessly, left me to myself.

IV

The evening of this already comfortless day I now recall as one of the most exasperating of my life. Maltby Phar arrived for dinner and the week-end – an exasperation foreseen; Phil came in after dinner – another; but what I did not foresee was that Lucette Arthur would bring her malicious self and her unspeakably tedious husband for a formal call. Lucette was an old friend of Gertrude, and I always suspected that her occasional evening visits were followed by a detailed report; in fact, I rather encouraged them, and returned them promptly, hoping that they were. In my harmless way of life even Lucette's talent for snooping could find, I felt, little to feed upon, and it did not wholly displease me that Gertrude should be now and then forced to recognize this.

The coming of Susan had, not unnaturally, for a time, provided Lucette with a wealth of interesting conjecture; she had even gone so far as to intimate that Gertrude felt I was making – the expression is entirely mine – an ass of myself, which neither surprised nor disturbed me, since Gertrude had always had a tendency to feel that my talents lay in that direction. But, on the whole, up to this time – barring the Sonia incident, which had afforded her a good deal of scope, but which, after all, could not be safely misinterpreted – Lucette had found at my house pretty thin pickings for scandal; and I could only wonder at the unwearying patience with which she pursued her quest.

She arrived with poor Doctor Arthur in tow – Dr. Lyman Arthur, who professed Primitive Eschatology in the School of Religion: eschatology being "that branch of theology which treats of the end of the world and man's condition or state after death" – just upon the heels of Phil, who shot me a despairing glance as we rose to greet them.

But Susan, I thought, welcomed them with undisguised relief. She had been surpassing herself before the fire, chatting blithely, wittily, even a little recklessly; but there are gayer evenings conceivable than one spent in the presence of three doleful men, two of whom have proposed marriage to you, and one of whom would have done so if he were not married already. Almost anything, even open espionage and covert eschatology, was better than that.

Lucette – the name suggests Parisian vivacity, but she was really large and physically languid and very blonde, scented at once, I felt, a something faintly brimstoneish in the atmosphere of my model home, and forthwith prepared herself for a protracted and pleasant evening. It so happened that the Arthurs had never met Maltby, and Susan carried through the ceremony of introduction with a fine swinging rhythm which settled us as one group before the fire and for some moments at least kept the conversation animated and general.

But Eschatology, brooding in the background, soon put an end to this somewhat hectic social burst. The mere unnoted presence of Dr. Lyman Arthur, peering nearsightedly in at the doorway on a children's party, has been known, I am told, to slay youngling joy and turn little tots self-conscious, so that they could no longer be induced by agonized mothers to go to Jerusalem, or clap-in clap-out. His presence now, gradually but surely, had much the same effect. Seated at Maltby's elbow, he passed into the silence and drew us, struggling but helpless, after him. For five horrible seconds nothing was heard but the impolite, ironic whispering of little flames on the hearth. Was this man's condition or state after death? Eschatology had conquered.

Susan, in duty bound as hostess, broke the spell, but it cannot be said she rose to the occasion. "Is it a party in a parlor," she murmured wistfully to the flames, "all silent and all – damned?"

Perceiving that Lucette supposed this to be original sin, I laughed much more loudly than cheerfully, exclaiming "Good old Wordsworth!" as I did so.

Then Maltby's evil genius laid hold on him.

"By the way," he snorted, "they tell me one of you academic ghouls has discovered that Wordsworth had an illegitimate daughter – whatever *that* means! Any truth in it? I hope so. It's the humanest thing I ever heard about the old sheep!"

Doctor Arthur cleared his throat, very cautiously; and it was evident that Maltby had not helped us much. Phil, in another vein, helped us little more.

"I wonder," he asked, "if anyone reads Wordsworth now – except Susan?"

No one, not even Susan, seemed interested in this question; and the little flames chuckled quietly once more.

Something had to be done.

"Doctor," I began, turning toward Eschatology, and knowing no more than my Kazak hearthrug what I was going to say, "is it true that – "

"Undoubtedly," intoned Eschatology, thereby saving me from the pit I was digging for myself. My incomplete question must have chimed with Doctor Arthur's private reflections, and he seemed to suppose some controversial matter under discussion. "Undoubtedly," he repeated… "And what is even more important is this – "

But Lucette silenced him with a "Why is it, dear, that you always let your cigar burn down at one side? It does look so untidy." And she leaned to me. "What delightfully daring discussions you must all of you have here together! You're all so terribly intellectual, aren't you? But do you never talk of anything but books and art and ideas? I'm sure you must," she added, fixing me with impenetrable blue eyes.

"Often," I smiled back; "even the weather has charms for us. Even food."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.