The Man Who Loved Children

Christina Stead
“Will I bring you my shawl, Mother?” This was his baby shawl that he always took to bed with him when he felt sick or weepy.

“No, Son.” She looked at him straight, as if at a stranger, and then drew him to her, kissing him on the mouth.

“You’re Mother’s blessing; go and help Louie.” He cavorted and dashed out, hooting. She heard him in half a minute, chattering away affectionately to his half sister.

“But I should have been better off if I’d never laid eyes on any of them,” Henny grumbled to herself, as she put on her glasses and peered at the dark serge.

2 Sam comes home.
Stars drifted in chinks of the sky as Sam came home: the lamps were clouded in leaves in this little island of streets between river and parks. Georgetown’s glut of children, issue of streets of separate little houses, went shouting, colliding downhill, while Sam came up whistling, seeing the pale faces, flying knees, lights and stars above, around him. Sam could have been home just after sunset when his harum-scarum brood were still looking for him, and he had meant to be there, for he never broke his word to them. He could have taken Shank’s ponies, which, he was fond of saying, “take me everywhere, far afield and into the world of marvels which lies around us, into the highways and byways, into the homes of rich and poor alike, seeking the doorstep of him who loves his fellow man—and fellow woman, of course—seeking every rostrum where the servants of evil may be flagellated, and the root of all evil exposed.”

On Shank’s ponies he could have got home that afternoon in less than an hour, crossing the Key Bridge from Rosslyn, when the naturalists left the new bird sanctuary on Analostan Island. But today Sam was the hero of his Department and of the naturalists
because he had got the long-desired appointment with the Anthropological Mission to the Pacific, and not only would he have his present salary plus traveling expenses, but his appointment was a bold step forward on his path of fame.

Sam looked, as he passed, at a ramshackle little house, something like the wretched slum he had once boarded in with his brother at Dundalk, out of Baltimore, and a smile bared his teeth.

“Going to glory,” said Sam: “I’ve come a long way, a long, long way, Brother. Eight thousand a year and expenses—and even Tohoga House, in Georgetown, D.C., lovely suburb of the nation’s capital; and the children of poor Sam Pollit, bricklayer’s son, who left school at twelve, are going to university soon, under the flashing colonnades of America’s greatest city, in the heart of the democratic Athens, much greater than any miserable Athens of the dirt grubbers of antiquity, yes—I feel sober, at rest. The old heart doesn’t flutter: I must be careful not to rest on my laurels now—haste not, rest not! I feel free!” Sam began to wonder at himself; why did he feel free? He had always been free, a free man, a free mind, a freethinker. “By Gemini,” he thought, taking a great breath, “this is how men feel who take advantage of their power.”

Sam looked round him—just ahead was Volta Place, where Dribble Smith, his friend in the Treasury, lived. He chuckled, hearing Dribble practicing his scales inside, to his daughter’s accompaniment. Passing Smith’s hedge, Sam said half aloud,

“What it must be, though, to taste supreme power!”

He thought of his long-dead mother, who came from the good old days when mothers dreamed of their sons’ being President, Poor woman, good woman: she little thought when she dropped a tear at my being sent to work in the fish market that in the fish market I would meet my fate. Ahead of him, not far uphill, was his harbor and his fate.

“Another thing,” said Sam to himself, “is that going away now, Madeleine and I will have time to use our heads, get things
straight: the love that harms another is not love—but what desires beset a man! They are not written in the calendar of a man’s duty; they are part of the secret life. Some time the secret life rises and overwhelms us—a tidal wave. We must not be carried away. We have each too much to lose.” He strode on, “Forget, forget!” He struggled to remember something else, something cheerful. They had taken him to Dirty Jack’s house to celebrate his appointment; there they had made merry, Sam being at the top of his form. There was a young creature there, timid, serious, big-eyed, with a black crop who turned out to be Dirty Jack’s (that is, Old Roebuck’s) only daughter, the one who did the charming flower painting. What an innocent, attentive face! It positively flamed with admiration; and the child-woman’s name was Gillian. He had made up a poem on the spur of the moment:

Gillian, my Gillian,
He would be a villy-un,
Who would be dally-dillyin’
About a Lacertilian
When he could look at you!

“By Jiminy!” ejaculated Sam, who had strange oaths, since he could never swear foul ones, “genius burns: nothing succeeds like success! And did Dirty Jack jerk back his head and give me one of those looks of his with his slugs of eyes, to intimidate me; whereas, no one noticed him at all, at all, poor old Dirty Jack.” He began to hum with his walking, “Oh, my darling Nelly Gray, they have taken you away.”

“By Gee,” he exclaimed half aloud, “I am excited! A pity to come home to a sleeping house, and what’s not asleep is the devil incarnate; but we’re a cheerful bunch, the Pollits are a cheerful bunch. But wait till my little gang hears that they’re going to lose
their dad for a nine-month! There’ll be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!” and Sam clapped his hands together. He loved this Thirty-fourth Street climb, by the quiet houses and under the trees. He had first come this way, exploring the neighborhood, a young father and widower, holding his year-old Louisa in his arms, with her fat bare legs wagging, and, by his side, elegant, glossy-eyed Miss Henrietta Collyer, a few months before their marriage; and that was ten years ago. Then afterwards, with each and all of the children, up and down and round about, taking them to the Observatory, the parks, the river, the woodland by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, or walking them out to Cabin John, teaching them birds, flowers, and all denizens of the woodland.

Now Old David Collyer’s Tohoga House, Sam’s Tohoga House, that he called his island in the sky, swam above him. A constellation hanging over that dark space midmost of the hill, which was Tohoga’s two acres, was slowly swamped by cloud.

He came up slowly, not winded, but snuffing in the night of the hot streets, looking up at the great house, tree-clouded. Now he crossed P Street and faced the hummock. On one side the long galvanized-iron back fence of his property ran towards Thirty-fifth Street and its strip of brick terrace slums. Over this fence leaned the pruned boughs of giant maples and oaks. The old reservoir was away to the right. A faint radiance showed Sam that the light in the long dining room was on. He ran up the side steps and stole across the grass behind the house, brushing aside familiar plants, touching with his left hand the little Colorado blue spruce which he had planted for the children’s “Wishing-Tree” and which was now five feet high.

He was just on six feet and therefore could peer into the long room. It ran through the house and had a window looking out at the front to R Street. A leaved oak table stood in the center and at the table, facing him, sitting in his carving chair, was his
eldest child, Louisa, soon twelve years old, the only child of his dead first wife, Rachel. Louie was hunched over a book and sat so still that she seemed alone in the house. She did nothing while he looked at her but turn a page and twist one strand of her long yellow hair round and round her finger, a trick of her father’s. Then without Sam having heard anything, she lifted her head and sat stock-still with her gray eyes open wide. She now rose stiffly and looked furtively at the window behind her. Sam heard nothing but the crepitations of arboreal night. Then he noticed that the window was sliding gently down. Louisa advanced jerkily to this magically moving window and watched it as it fitted itself into the sill. Then she shook her head and turning to the room as if it were a person she laughed soundlessly. It was nothing but the worn cords loosening. She opened the window and then shut it again softly, but leaned against the pane looking up into the drifting sky, seeking something in the street. She had been there, and Sam, whistling softly Bringing Home the Sheaves, was about to go inside, when a thin, dark scarecrow in an off-white wrapper—Henrietta, his wife—stood in the doorway. Through the loose window frame he heard her threadbare words,

“You’re up poring over a book with lights flaring all over the house at this hour of the night. You look like a boiled owl! Isn’t your father home yet?”

“No, Mother.”

“Why is your knee bleeding? Have you been picking the scab again?”

Louie hung her head and looked at her knee, crossed with old scars and new abrasions and bruises: she flushed and the untidy hair fell over her face.

“Answer, answer, you sullen beast!”

“I bumped it.”

“You lie all the time.”
The child straightened with wide frowning eyes, pulled back her arms insolently. Henny rushed at her with hands outstretched and thrust her firm bony fingers round the girl's neck, squeezing and saying, "Ugh," twice. Louisa looked up into her stepmother's face, squirming, but not trying to get away, questioning her silently, needing to understand, in an affinity of misfortune. Henrietta dropped her arms quickly and gripped her own neck with an expression of disgust, then pushed the girl away with both hands; and as she flounced out of the room, cried, "I ought to put us all out of our misery!"

Louisa moved back to her chair and stood beside it, looking down at the book. Then she sank into the chair and, putting her face on both hands, began to read again.

Sam turned his back to the house and looked south, over the dark, susurrous orchard, towards the faint lights of Rosslyn. A zephyr stole up the slope as quietly as a nocturnal animal and with it all the domestic scents, wrapping Sam's body in peace. Within, a torment raged, day and night, week, month, year, always the same, an endless conflict, with its truces and breathing spaces; out here were a dark peace and love.

"Mother Earth," whispered Sam, "I love you, I love men and women, I love little children and all innocent things, I love, I feel I am love itself—how could I pick out a woman who would hate me so much!"

Surefooted he moved way down to the animal cages, heard them stir uneasily, and spoke to the raccoon,

"Procyon! Procyon! Here's little Sam!" But the raccoon refused to come to the wire. He went up the slope again, thinking, *Fate puts brambles, hurdles in my path, she even gives me an Old Woman of the Sea, to try me, because I am destined for great things.*

When Sam came into the hall there was no light anywhere on the ground floor. The saffron dark through his sitting room at the head
of the first flight of stairs showed that Louie was in her bedroom. She had heard his whistle and had rushed upstairs with her book.

“Why, why?” thought Sam. “She could have waited to hear what her daddy has been doing all day. She is so dogged—and she has her little burdens.” He climbed softly upstairs and peeped into the bedroom. Louie’s bed stood against the back or south wall and little Evelyn’s against the front wall. A brown paper shade arranged by Louie cut off the light from the smaller girl’s face. Louie in her petticoat, one sock on, one off, turned towards him guiltily.

“Why you up so late, Looloo?”
“Reading.”
“Been seein’ things, Looloo?”
“What do you mean?” She looked suspicious.
“So you ain’t been seein’ things?” He began to chuckle.
She was silent, pondering.
“My mind says to me, it says, little glumpy Looloo been seein’ things and Looloo’s been unhappy too.”
She hung her head.
“What you see in the darkness of night, Looloo?”
“Nothing!”
“That ain’t much for tuh see. Air you tellin’ your poor Sam de troof?”
“I never lie,” she said angrily.
“No josts [ghosts], no sperrits, no invisible hands, no nuffin?”
“No,” but she began to smile shamefacedly.
“All right, Looloo: bed! Early start tomorrow.” He grinned at her, white-toothed, red-lipped, blue eyes bright.
“The paint came, Dad. Are you going to paint?” she asked excitedly.
“Sure thing. Fust thing you know! And Looloo—the big news, the big news has come! Shh! I’m going!”
“When?” She started towards him. He was very happy.
“You're going to be months and months without your poor little Sam.”

“Who'll look after us?”

“You're mother and Auntie Bonnie: same as now. And you yourself, Loolook! You'll be in high school after the holidays!”

She reluctantly gave her book into his firm persuasive fingers. It was *The Legend of Roncesvalles*. He poked through it for a while and then handed it back, saying,

“Yes, you'll learn from that, Loolook, that where there are kings there will be wars; don't let it give you the idea, Loo, that there's romance in those old savages: but you know better than that. I know my girl.”

So saying, he moved out and dropped downstairs, congratulating himself, “She said nothing about the little scene! Good girl! Nothing morbid there! Well, least said, soonest mended!”

He sat down to the covered tray that Henny had left for him as usual, and began to drink his milk and eat thinly cut sandwiches. He sat in the chair Louie had just vacated.

“To a certain extent,” he continued ruminating, “to a child of mine, these negative early experiences are aids in the formation of character, will prove of great value in penetrating human nature and human motives later on: perhaps she will go far, like myself, on the path of human understanding. Self-control; and a penetration of the springs of human action. It's a pity she's not a good-looker,” he finished hastily. He forgot Louie, and went on about Madeleine.

Madeleine was his secretary, Madeleine Vines, and he had only got her by a little gentle pressure, a little friendly smile in the right place, for she was the Helen of the Department of Commerce, and her admirers weekly predicted a siege by the Treasury, or State, War, and Navy, to get her. They made a splendid pair, handsome man and lovely woman; but months had gone by before Sam had suddenly seen the light pouring forth from her. On that day, a
Tuesday morning in late winter, she had said these simple words, “Mr. Pollit, I just love to hear you talk!”

“That did it,” said Sam rapturously now, “yes, that did it. But what a slowpoke that same Samuel Pollit is!”

Suddenly there was a tapping at the back window and Sam started out of his delicious reverie. The shower had come; and it was very late.

Sam let the shower pass, but it came again. He, waking through the night, saw through the panes the tussle of cloud streak and sky sparkle, leaf blot and lamp flake, and smelled the damp cedar. Some marauder fluttered the nestlings. Sam looked out his window with “Hist, Hist!” and reduced the twig world to silence. Then, shutting the windows in his study, in the girls’ room and the twins’ room next to his and in the attic room, sometime towards morning, he woke some of his children and through their half-dreams they heard him say, Fine day, tomorrow, kids! I told it to stop raining by sunup! and tomorrow Sunday-Funday.

Louie, who had spent several hours already in an incomunicable world, woke to hear riding again the night rider in the street outside. For years now at night she had heard him riding his horse up and down, sometimes galloping faintly down the street but generally exercising around their very house, and for hours, as long as she could stay awake, Ker-porrop! Ker-porrop! Ker-porrop! he went. She had looked out before she went to bed, for the horseman, many nights, as tonight, and had not seen him. He only began to ride late after other folk were abed, Ker-porrop! Ker-porrop! on a thin-limbed, bay filly, as she imagined. Once she had asked, “Who is the horseman?” and been laughed at, “It’s only a dream!” But it was no dream for she heard it only when awake, and sometimes faint and sometimes near, he rode tonight again, in the summer swelter. She could almost see him as he passed and repassed under the lamplight and the dapple of leaves. She got up and leaned out of the southward
window, her plait tumbling over the window sill; but the sound had ceased, he must have turned the corner. Yes, when she went back to bed, there he was again. She liked to wake in the night and hear the friendly rider: so perhaps, she thought, went Paul Revere, tumbling through the night, alone, a man when all others lay like logs. Louie and the rider on the red mare were wakers.

3 Sunday a Funday.
On Sunday morning the sun bolted up brash and chipper from the salad beds of the Atlantic and with a red complexion came loping towards them over the big fishing hole of the Chesapeake. Before it was light the dooryard thrush began to drop his song, *quirt-quirt*, hesitant, fretful, inquiring, angelically solitary, from the old elm across the street. Sam whistled to him and then nestlings fluttered, a beast fell to the ground, the early birds got to work, and presently, by hearty creaking and concerted peeping, they and Sam made the sky pale and flagged the daystar. Sam was always anxious for morning. He was greedy for the daylight world, because the fevers of the dark, and the creatures real to man’s sixth, inward, dark sense, which palpitates in such an agony about three o’clock in the morning, all disappeared at the dark’s first fading. When the first ray came, he stood on feet of clay in a world of clay; the dread other worlds of dreams were gone beyond comparison. In these fresh summer mornings (it was fresh on the hill) when the earth perspired profusely, Sam would often get up before daybreak, patter downstairs in bare feet, just wearing bathing pants, and would go out on to the lawn, getting ready for some job, getting the animals up, or standing under the trees, whistling to the birds. But not today, because he had stayed awake most of the night.

It was six-thirty by the alarm clock. Sam began whistling softly through his teeth the tune of,
One evening in the month of May
(Johnny get your gun, get your gun!)—

and waited. There was a grunt next door in the twins’ room. The twins were turning over, trying to dig shuteye out of their pillows, closing their ears. Upstairs, Ernie’s voice joined in,

I met ole Satan by the way.

There was a slippery sound like a little fish flopping on the stairs: that was four-year-old Tommy hurrying down to his mother’s room. Louisa, from her bed across the sitting room, said sleepily, “Shh! Shh! It’s early!”

Sam waited a moment, thinking, Will I whistle up the Gemini or my Darkeyes? Of all these little affections, he was most sure of Evelyn, his pet, a queer little dove, who in her eight years had never been naughty and who bubbled with laughter when he grinned at her, hung her head, cried, when he scowled. He called her her little woman, *Little-Womey*. He began,

“Little-Womey, Little-Womey, git-up, git-up!”

“Sh, sh!” said Louie in whose room Evie slept. No answer.

“Is you awake, Little-Womey, or is you in the arms of Morpheus?”

No answer: but by almost imperceptible noises Sam could tell that everyone was awake now, listening. There was an exclamation in his wife’s room downstairs. Henrietta had been awake for hours, as long as Sam himself, knitting, reading, waiting for her morning tea.

“Womey, Womey, c’mon, c’mon, giddap for your pore little Sam.”

Evelyn giggled. He heard it all right and insisted, “C’mon, Womey: come on: do my head, come, scratch my head. Come, do m’head: do m’yed, do m’yed. Come on, Penthestes; co-ome on, Penthestes.”
His voice had fallen to the lowest seductive note of yearning. Evie chuckled with doubt, pleasure. She had many petnames, any, in fact, that occurred to Sam, such as Penthestes (a chickadee) or Trogloodytes (the house wren), names of engaging little dusky birds or animals. Saul, the more self-possessed of the twins, shouted to Evelyn, while the other, Little-Sam, who was his father’s copy, shouted out that he was awake. Their mother, in her bed, grumbled again. Sam was enjoying himself and now began to whine,

“Womey won’t come en scratch m’yed: Womey is mean to her pore little dad.”

Evie jumped out of the covers and ran across Sam’s sitting room. At his bedroom door she giggled, eyes flying, fat brown starfish hands together on the dark mouth.

“I heard you the first time, Taddy.”

“C’mon,” he begged, full of love for her. She jumped onto his bed and crouched on his pillow behind his head: there she began to massage his head and twist his thick silky hair. He closed his eyes in ease and asked in an undertone,

“Is Looloo up yet?”

“No, Taddy.”

Sam whistled an ascending chromatic scale which was Louisa’s whistle, and the same scale descending, which was Ernest’s whistle. Evie, imitating her mother, protested,

“She is asleep, Taddy: let her sleep. She needs it.” Sam took no notice but went on in an insinuating, teasing voice,

“Loobyloo! Loo-oobylool Loozy! Tea!”

Although Louisa did not answer she was at that moment crawling soundlessly out of bed. She heard him urging Evie, “Go on, Womey, call her Loozy.”

“No, Taddy, she doesn’t like it.”

“Go on, when I tahzoo [tells you].”

“No, Taddy, she can hear.”
“Loo-hoozy! Loozy! Tea-heehee!”

Out of the tail of her eye Evelyn saw Louisa flash across the landing to the stairs. “She went,” she chanted soothingly, “she went.”

“This Sunday-Funday has come a long way,” said Sam softly: “it’s been coming to us, all day yesterday, all night from the mid-Pacific, from Peking, the Himalayas, from the fishing grounds of the old Leni Lenapes and the deeps of the drowned Susquehanna, over the pond pine ragged in the peat and the lily swamps of Anacostia, by scaffolded marbles and time-bloodied weatherboard, northeast, northwest, Washington Circle, Truxton Circle, Sheridan Circle to Rock Creek and the blunt shoulders of our Georgetown. And what does he find there this morning as every morning, in the midst of the slope, but Tohoga House, the little shanty of Gulliver Sam’s Lilliputian Pollity—Gulliver Sam, Mrs. Gulliver Henny, Lugubrious Louisa, whose head is bloody but unbowed, Ernest the calculator, Little-Womey—” Evie laughed. “—Saul and Sam the boy-twins and Thomas-snowshoe-eye, all sun-tropes that he come galloping to see.”

“She doesn’t come to see us,” deprecated Evie.

“No, he could live without us,” Sam agreed. He opened his eyes, “Whar my red book?” His bedside table was littered with pamphlets from the Carnegie Peace Foundation, scientific journals, and folders from humanitarian leagues. On top lay three magazines. Sam picked out one which was folded back and laid his forefinger on the pretty, sober woman pictured above the title.

“Bin readin’ fine stor-wy, Little Womey,” he said, “’bout a fine woman en a fine little girl. Good sweet story—makes your pore little Sam bust into tears.”

“Is it sad, Taddy?”

“It is sad and glad. It is just like our poor little silly, funny human life, but it comes to a good end because they are good people underneath all their poor willfulnesses and blindnesses. They really love
each other, although they do show a tendency to scratch out each other’s eyes at moments: en then they find they don’t hate each other as much as they thought. People are like that, my *Troglodytes minor*. Love people, little Darkeyes, always be in love with human beings and you will be happy. And what is more, much more, you will do good.”

“Taddy,” she began, hesitating, “can Isabel come in today?”

“Mebbe,” said Sam. “Oh, mwsk, mwsk!” He kissed a girl figured in a corset advertisement, “I’ll marry her! Hello, beautiful! Look at the girl with da spaghett’—mwsk, mwsk, mwsk! I love her. I’ll marry her too. Mwsk!

Oh, woman in our hours of ease
Uncertain, coy and hard to please:
But when the time comes round for chow
A ministering angel thou.

Look at this one with the mayonnaise. Mwsk! Here’s a knockout. Mwsk!”

“You missed that one, Taddy.”

“Not her! She’s a fright: she’s a holy terror. No ma’am: I like my girls often and I likes ‘em pretty. En look at this one. Holy Methusalem! He must have had his mother-in-law staying with him. This one would frighten a screech owl at midnight on Bear Mountain. The question is, how bare? Mwsk! Oh, raccoons and rattlesnakes! This one knocks my eyes out! I only got one eye. I can’t stand it. I must marry her at once and get back my eye.”

Evie giggled, giggled, shivering with pleasure. The twin boys and Ernest had crowded into the room, and craned and gleamed round the bed, saying, “Oo, not that one, she’s ugly.”

“Here’s a peach,” said Ernest. Ernest was nearly ten.

“This one’s a peacherino, though, she’s mine,” Sam said. He kissed the cocktail heroine several times, “young and juicy, a ripe tomato,”
he continued wickedly, grinning at the boys, while Evie pored over the picture. “Mwsk! Here’s a little ducky, she looks naughty but she’s a good girl really.”

“How do you know?” Evie stared at the girl with thin legs in silk stockings and flying crayon billows.

Sam teased, “They don’t write stories about really bad girls, Little-Womey, remember that. And they never make a really bad girl pretty, even if they do write about her for the sake of the truth. That’s because they really want people to be happy and good, and want us to believe that the beautiful are the good and vice versa. Because, if we believe it, it will come true—”

“Here’s one you can kiss, Dad,” cried Saul, excitedly.

“Aren’t we going to scrape and paint this morning, Pad?” Ernest wanted to know.

“When the tea comes—big news, big news,” said Sam, raising himself in bed and looking round at them. They fawned round his bed, expectant.

“You’re going to get a new car?” Saul hazarded; but Ernest knew it was no such thing.

From there they could hear the kettle lid hopping madly on the stove. Sam whistled Louie’s whistle and shouted,

“Loozy! Water’s a-bilin!”

This was followed by another shout from below, his wife’s, and a third, a soprano hail came from the attic floor, where Sam’s youngest sister, Bonnie, was still abed; she sang, “Hold everything! I’m coming down.”

“In the sweet by-and-by,” said Sam to the children and winked. The kettle stopped bobbling. Bonnie shouted,

“Ki-hids? Louie?”

“Stay in bed, Bon,” Sam replied: “Looloo’s making the tea.” He explained to the children, “Bonniferous might as well snooze an hour longer da fornin [this morning]: Sunday a funday for all hands.”
“But Looloo is working,” objected Ernest.
“Looloo is asleep too, on her feet,” grinned Sam. Now there was another shout from belowstairs,
“Tea up or down?”
“Up.”
In a minute they heard the jingle of tea-things and Louie’s grunting. She was a heavy girl, overgrown for her years. She came in with her large fat face pink, but glum. She put the tray down on the bed beside Sam’s calves and poured out all round. When she came down from the attic, where she had carried Aunt Bonnie’s, Sam sang out,
“Whar’s yourn, Loogoobrious?”
“In the kitchen.”
“Why'n't you bring it along? Ernest-Paine-Pippy! Go and get Louie’s tea for her.”
“I’ve got to make the porridge,” she cried; and so got away. She tripped on the oilcloth at the head of the stairs.
“Johnny-head-in-air!” called Sam, “c’mere a minute: be here with your father when he tahzem [tells them] the great news! Kids, your Sam’s going to Malaya with the Smithsonian Expedition, like I always told you I would.”
“When?” asked Louie morosely.
“Don’t know yet,” he said: “will you be glad, Looloo, to see your poor little Sam go away to furin parts?”
“No.”
“Will you miss your poor little dad?”
“Yes,” she lowered her eyes in confusion.
“Bring up your tea, Looloo-girl: I’m sick, hot head, nedache [headache], dot pagans in my stumjack [got pains in my stomach]: want my little fambly around me this morning. We’ll have a corroboree afterwards when I get better. Mother will make the porridge.” He was begging her, yearning after her.
“Mother told me to make it,” she said obstinately.
He gave a sudden impatient glance,
“Go ahead then! I’ve never met anyone so cussed in all my
born days!”

Lowering, she turned and trudged out. Halfway downstairs a
smile flashed into her face—she was free! upstairs her father was
singing and chattering with her brothers and sister; her mother and
aunt were in bed reading; the morning was beginning in slow time,
and her book for which she had an unconquerable passion, the same
Legend of Roncesvalles which she was now reading for the third time,
was open on the washtub beside the stove. She could read it as she
sifted in the oatmeal. It was a glorious hot morning; the birds were
now in the full middle of their music. The shadows were diluted light;
the air was hot and moist; sweet air from flowers and humus and
pines drifted in. The old wood of the house smelled precious, and
even the smell of oatmeal slowly coming to the boil was wholesome.

When the porridge was made, Louie took her book in to the
showerhouse built at the end of the veranda, and propped it on a
crossbeam while she took her cold shower. She stood under the
water, stirring gently, and her wet fingers pulped the pages as she
turned. Outside the house already resounded to their shouts.

Bonnie, with her silver-gilt hair in a pageboy bob, skipped round
the kitchen getting breakfast and singing “Deh, vieni, non tardar.” Sam
and the boys were in the washhouse, mixing the paint, and Evie was
laying the table in the long dining room. A burst of song came from
out of doors, the father and his fledglings starting up with “Mid
pleasures and palaces”; and when they came to the chorus, Evie
could be heard fluting away, “Home, home, sweet, sweet home!”
The birds, cheered by all this, began to sing madly like a thousand
little harmless brass devils under the leaves; hearing which, Louie
at once put on the record that always made the birds begin to cheep,
“Papageno, Papagena!” Henrietta sang out,
“He can’t open an eye without having the whole tribe jigging and buzzing round him.”

Coming from the shower, Louie saw through the door Tommy sitting in his mother’s armchair, playing with her solitaire cards. A musky smell always came from Henrietta’s room, a combination of dust, powder, scent, body odors that stirred the children’s blood, deep, deep. It had as much attraction for them as Sam’s jolly singing, and when they were allowed to, they gathered in Henrietta’s room, making hay, dashing to the kitchen to get things for her, asking her if she wanted her knitting, her book, tumbling out into the hall and back, until it was as if she had twenty children, their different voices steaming, bubbling, and popping, like an irrepressible but inoffensive crater. Henrietta would not have them on the bed with her, though. She sat there by herself, in the center, propped on two or three pillows, in an old dressing gown, with her glasses on and her gray-speckled black hair drawn tightly back in a braid. Beside her would be some darning, or a library book sprawling halfway down the bed where she had thrown it in disgust, with a “Such rot!”

But she sometimes let them snuggle into the shawls, old gowns, dirty clothes ready for the wash, and blankets thrown over her great easy chair, hold their small parliament on the flowered green carpet, or look at all the things in her dressing table, and in what they called her treasure drawers. All Henny’s drawers were treasure drawers. In them were spilled and tossed all sorts of laces, ribbons, gloves, flowers, jabots, belts, and collars, hairpins, powders, buttons, imitation jewels, shoelaces, and—wonder of wonders!—little pots of rouge, bits of mascara, anathema to Sam, but to them a joyous mystery. Often, as a treat, the children were allowed to look in the drawers and then would plunge their hands into this mess of textures and surfaces, with sparkling eyes and rapt faces, feeling, guessing, until their fingers struck something they did not recognize, when their faces would grow serious, surprised, and they would start
pulling, until a whole bundle of oddments lay on the floor and their mother would cry,

“Oh, you pest!”

There were excitement, fun, joy, and even enchantment with both mother and father, and it was just a question of whether one wanted to sing, gallop about, and put on a performance (“showing off like all Pollitry,” said Henny), or look for mysteries (“Henny’s room is a chaos,” said Sam). A child could question both father and mother and get answers: but Sam’s answers were always to the point, full of facts; while the more one heard of Henny’s answer, the more intriguing it was, the less was understood. Beyond Sam stood the physical world, and beyond Henny—what? A great mystery. There was even a difference in the rooms. Everyone knew everything that was in Sam’s rooms, even where the life-insurance policy and the bankbook were, but no one (and least of all Sam, that know-all and see-all) knew for certain what was in even one of Henrietta’s closets and tables. Their mother had locked cabinets with medicines and poisons, locked drawers with letters and ancient coins from Calabria and the south of France, a jewel case, and so on. The children could only fossick in them at intervals, and Sam was not even allowed into the room. Thus Henny had at times, even to Louie, the air of a refuge of delight, a cave of Aladdin, while Sam was more like a museum. Henrietta screamed and Samuel scolded: Henny daily revealed the hypocrisy of Sam, and Sam found it his painful duty to say that Henny was a born liar. Each of them struggled to keep the children, not to deliver them into the hands of the enemy: but the children were not taking it in at all. Their real feelings were made up of the sensations received in the respective singsongs and treasure hunts.

Louisa was Henny’s stepchild, as everyone knew, and no one, least of all Louie, expected Henny to love this girl as she loved her own. But though Henny’s charms had perceptibly diminished, Henny’s treasures, physical and mental, the sensual, familiar house life she
led, her kindness in sickness, her queer tags of folklore, boarding-school graces, and femininity had gained on Louie. Uncritical and without knowledge of other women, or of mother's love, she was able to like Henny’s airs, the messes of her linen and clothes closets, her castoff hats and shoes, the strange beautiful things she got secondhand from rich cousins, her gifts, charities, and the fine lies to ladies come to afternoon tea. As for affection, Louie did not miss what she had never known. Henny, delicate and anemic, really disliked the powerful, clumsy, healthy child, and avoided contact with her as much as she could. It happened that this solitude was exactly what Louie most craved. Like all children she expected intrusion and impertinence: she very early became grateful to her stepmother for the occasions when Henny most markedly neglected her, refused to instruct her, refused to interpret her to visitors.

Henny, in the clouded perspectives of Louie’s childish memory, had once been a beautiful, dark, thin young lady in a ruffled silk dressing gown, mother of a very large red infant in a ruffled bassinet, receiving in state a company of very beautiful young ladies, all in their best dresses. After this particular day, Louie’s memory was blacked out, and only awoke some years later to another Henny. The dark lady of the ruffles had disappeared and in her place was a grubby, angry Henny, who, after screeching, and crying at them all, would fall in a faint on the floor. At first, Sam would run to get cushions; later, when they reached the epoch where Sam habitually said, “Don’t take any notice, Looloo, she is foxing!” Louie still ran for the cushions, and would puff and struggle over the deathlike face, drawn and yellow under its full black hair; and would run to the kitchen to ask Hazel, the thin, bitter maid, for Henny’s tea. When quite small, she had been trusted to go to the forbidden medicine chest, to get out Henny’s medicine—phenacetin, aspirin, or the tabu pyramidon—or her smelling salts; and even once had brought the bottle of spirits hidden behind all those bottles at the back,
which all the children knew was there, and which none of them would ever have revealed to their father. None of them thought there was cheating in this: their father was the tables of the law, but their mother was natural law; Sam was household czar by divine right, but Henny was the czar’s everlasting adversary, household anarchist by divine right.

But here came Louie observing them both fitfully and with difficulty, since her last birthday. There did not seem to be any secrets in her parents’ life. Henny was very free of comments on her husband, and Sam, in season, took each of his children aside, but most particularly the eldest, and told, in simple language, the true story of his disillusionment. In this light, Louie and clever Ernie, who observed and held his tongue, saw, in a strange Punch-and-Judy show, unrecognizable Sams and Hennys moving in a closet of time, with a little flapping curtain, up and down.

“The night of our marriage I knew I was doomed to unhappiness!”
“I never wanted to marry him: he went down on his knees!”
“She lied to me within three days of marriage!”
“The first week I wanted to go back home!”
“Oh, Louie, the hell, where there should have been heaven!”
“But he stuck me with his brats, to make sure I didn’t get away from him.”

The children tried to make head or tail of these fatal significant sentences, formed in the crucible of the dead past, and now come down on their heads, heavy, cold, dull. Why were these texts hurled at them from their parents’ Olympus: Louie tried to piece the thing together; Ernie concluded that adults were irrational.

On her eleventh birthday in February, Henny had given Louisa the old silver mesh bag that her stepdaughter had desired for years. Love and gratitude welled up in Louie; the more so that Sam made an especially poor showing on the same occasion, giving an exercise book that Louie needed for school. Since then Louie had
passed on to an entirely original train of thought which was, in part, that Henny was perhaps not completely guilty towards Sam, that perhaps there was something to say on Henny’s side. Was she always a liar when she spoke of her pains and miseries, always trying to make a scene when she denounced Sam’s frippery flirtations and domestic crimes? Henny was gradually becoming not a half-mad tyrant, whose fits and maladies must be cared for by a stern, muscular nurse; not all a hysterical, the worthless, degenerate society girl whom Sam had hoped to reform despite vitiated blood and bad habits of cardplaying, alcohol, and tobacco; but she was becoming a creature of flesh and blood, nearer to Louisa because, like the little girl, she was guilty, rebellious, and got chastised. Louie had actually once or twice had moments when she could listen to Henny’s scoldings and (although she trembled and cried bitterly) could recognize that they came from some illness, her neuralgias, or cold hands and feet, or the accumulation of bills, or from Sam’s noisy joys with the children, and perennial humanitarian orations.

Although Louisa was on the way to twelve and almost a woman, Sam had not suspected this veering. He went on confiding in her and laying the head of his trouble on her small breasts. But Henny, creature of wonderful instinct and old campaigner, had divined almost instantly. No, it was deeper. Henny was one of those women who secretly sympathize with all women against all men; life was a rotten deal, with men holding all the aces. The stepmother did nothing extraordinary to bring out Louisa’s sympathy, because she had left too much behind her and gone too far along her road to care about the notions of even the flesh of her own flesh, but this irresistible call of sex seemed now to hang in the air of the house. It was like an invisible animal, which could be nosed, though, lying in wait in one of the corners of this house that was steeped in hidden as well as spoken drama. Sam adored Darwin but was no good at invisible animals. Against him, the intuitions of stepmother
and stepdaughter came together and procreated, began to put on
carnality, feel blood and form bone, and a heart and brain were
coming to the offspring. This creature that was forming against
the gay-hearted, generous, eloquent, goodfellow was bristly,
foul, a hyena, hate of woman the house-jailed and child-chained
against the keycarrier, childnamer, and riothaver. Sometimes now
an involuntary sly smile would appear on Henny’s face when she
heard that dull brute, Sam’s pigheaded child, oppose to his quicksilver
her immovable obstinacy, a mulishness beyond rhyme and reason.
Sam had his remedies, but Henny smiled in pity at his remedies. He
would take Louie out, often in view of the street, in order to give
his “lesson a social point” and say, in that splendid head tone of his,
“You see, I am not angry: I am not punishing you out of pique. I
am just. You know why I am punishing you. Why is it?”
“For no reason.”
He would give her a gentle flip, “Don’t be obstinate! You know
why!”
He would keep it up, till she began to bawl, yielded, “Yes, I know.”
Then he would make her hold out her hands, and would beat her,
“You will understand why I have to do this when you get a little older.”
“I will never understand.”
“You will understand and thank me!”—and in what a contended
tone!
“I will never understand and never forgive you!”
“Looloo-girl!” this, yearning.
“I will never forgive you!”
He laughed. Henny, half indignant, half interested, behind the
curtain, would think, “Wait, wait, wait: only wait, you devil!”
Henny had begun to beat Louisa less; and Louie had not been
wrong in seeing a distorted sympathy for her in Henny’s pretense
of strangling her the night before.
APOLLO

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