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A DREAM OF KINGS

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BOOKS BY DAVIS GRUBB

A Dream of Kings

The Night of the Hunter

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A DREAM OF KINGS

by Davis Grubb

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS NEW YORK
1955

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For Louis Delaplaine Grubb

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Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations, and leane emptinesse:
He ruine'd mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.

John Donne

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BOOK 1

1855-1860

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I

FROM the stairwell I could see the strangers in the kitchen while they could not see me. For some time I had watched their approach along the ragged winter road beyond the orchard hill: the old woman in the flapping gray cape and the little girl in the green velvet bonnet. The old woman rode the sorrel like a man; her legs astride the mare's bare back, her skirts above the tops of her high-laced shoes. The little girl hung on behind and managed the carpetbag, which stood now on the stone floor of my Aunt Sarah's kitchen, sagging like a piper's wind-broken bag.

So he's gone away at last! said my Aunt Sarah, standing with her arms folded, regarding the pair.

And the old woman simpered sadly and snuffled, flicking her nose sheepishly like a man and then met my Aunt's inspection and nodded.

He took off at last, said Aunt Sarah, and caught up the cold carpetbag and stood with it. Well, you're not surprised, Rebecca!

No, whispered the old woman with a foolish sidelong leer, head atilt.

—and left you to tend his dead wife's child without so much as a shinplaster in your purse! Well you needn't answer! I know! Lord! Men! God save us from them! Come along, Rebecca, and bring the child! I'll show you the room you're to have!

Thank you, Sarah! said the old woman and followed behind, eyes downcast, tugging the small, strange girl like a solemn, green-caped owl. They came toward the kitchen steps, to the stairwell and I fled silently before them up into the dark hallway and hid in my Grandfather's room, by the giant cherry-wood bureau that smelled yet of his green glycerine soap and kitefoot tobacco though he had been dead five cold winters now. And I watched as they passed, casting long

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shadows from the pale afternoon windows and Aunt Sarah still talking.

God would never forgive me, Rebecca Hornbrook, if I didn't offer shelter to you and the child yonder! Even as ye do it unto the least of these, ye do it unto me!

And for a moment I thought old Rebecca had cried out in laughter but when I saw her gnarled fingers fly to her face I knew it had been a soft bleat of weeping. I crept ahead of them to the hallway now, past the pier glass that was taller than anyone I knew, and hunkered out of sight behind a split-bottom chair and watched them in the little room that crouched beneath the wing of the roof. Aunt Sarah set the carpetbag down by the spool bed and flicked a flyspeck from the glass.

Rebecca, get hold of yourself now and I'll have Suse fix a pot of coffee!

The old woman stood shamelessly weeping, not even covering her face to spare us the sight of it; standing with her tired arms dangling like lengths of stove wood in her cape and her own bonnet, shapeless and glum as a coal bucket, awry and cocked upon her head. The tears dropped slowly off her twisted cheeks and her tongue flicked out as if to taste them as they passed. Then she stopped suddenly and caught her breath in a mighty heave and opened her eyes blandly.

I'm all right, Sarah! Oh Lord, what would we ever do without you! We'd be on the roads—we'd be sleeping in ditches this very night, Sarah Christopher, this little child and I—.

Well, you're here! said Aunt Sarah, straightening the quilt on the bed and fluttering at dusty places with her lawn kerchief. Lord, those lazy niggers! I could switch them for the state of this room!

Oh my, Sarah, you needn't mind! Cathie and me will have ourselves a little party redding it! It's such a pre-t-ty room!

And the very prettiness of the room seemed to have her at the brink of tears again.

Sit down, Rebecca! Yonder in the rocker! And you, too, child! Yes, you Cathie! Yonder on the carpet stool!

And they obeyed: the woman like an old child and the girl like a young child but both like children who must be told how a game is to be played.

Because I fear God and praise His name, said my Aunt Sarah without emotion, without even stopping to fuss and redd and fidget everywhere in that tiny corner of our house. I have taken you in. I have

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known you since we were girls together, Rebecca Hornbrook, and I knew and loved poor, dead Ella. I told her when she married that man that she would come to sorrow. And she did—cut off in her youth and blighted in the bloom of her beauty and I will contend to my last breath that it was for grief at the rottenness and shame of him—.

Crouched there in the hallway, before the cold breath that seemed to blow always from that tiny door, I listened to her then and was thankful that those whiplike words were not meant for me.

—and now that he has gone off, I say, Good riddance to bad rubbish! Yes, I am glad he has gone and I hope he stays away!

Bige meant well! mumbled the old woman recklessly.

Pshaw, Rebecca! If you've come here to take up for him you might as well pack up the mare again and follow him down the road!

Oh, Sarah! wailed the old one with a choke of fright. I don't rightly know what I *do* mean today! It's just me and little Cathie here and all I want is a home for her! Yes, Sarah, if I seem to be a burden —if it's too much to take me in, too—then at least let the child stay!

Pshaw, Rebecca! Shut up and stop yammering like a baby! I said you'd both be welcome here! But let me finish! Welcome here because I would not face my Lord with that on my conscience—that I'd turned you away—the least of His children!

God bless you, blubbered the old woman, helpless and wallowing now, like a broken clock with its whirring mainspring amuck.

But I'll expect you to earn your keep! said Aunt Sarah flatly. I'll expect you to work hard—the both of you! That's only Christian!

Yes, my dear! Oh, Cathie and me'll be mighty handy to have around! We can scrub and cook mighty fine, can't we, chicky?

But the child had not even taken off her bonnet yet, perched gravely and obediently on the carpet stool by the window, her moon face chalky in the shadows.

Now come along, Rebecca! sniffed my Aunt Sarah. The girl can unpack and redd up the room to suit the two of you while you and I go have some hot coffee! Suse! Toot! Put the pot on!

And I retreated again into the dust of my Grandfather's room as she came hooting down the dark hallway with the old woman shuffling like a fat obedient sheep behind her and off into the stillness of the stairwell to the kitchen. The house ticked. And it seemed to me always when the house ticked that it was thinking, bemused and speculating, a cunning and watchful intellect of musty, dusty, ancient joists and slates and shutters. And with the house ticking about me I

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stole a glance around the door jamb, into the fusty room to see if still the moon face beneath the faded green bonnet hung suspended like a flower in the shadows. She had not moved and since she was staring clearly and boldly into my face I spoke up in self-protection.

Who are you?

My name is Catherine Ellen Hornbrook, she said softly but distinctly, and it seemed to me that her dark eyes shone with something strange and challenging and although I had long moments before decided that it would be my game for many seasons to make life itchy and troublesome to her I thought just then that I had best go easy. Still I walked boldly into the little room and circled the stranger, staring at her with a princely leer.

Where's your real folks? I whispered.

My mother went when I was three, she said solemnly as if saying a school lesson by rote, To sit in heaven at the knee of our Lord. My father has gone South to—to—.

She faltered then—a breath, it was, no more—and then turned her dark gleaming eyes to the window, to the light of cold winter and held them there, as if gathering in a harvest of ghostly memories.

My father, she said, her voice a little lower than before, shall be a King some day.

What?

My father shall be a King some day, she repeated, patiently, as if one always had to repeat things to children.

And when he is King he will come back, she said, tugging at the ribbons of her bonnet beneath her chin. And bring lots of lovely, lovely things and we will be rich.

She took off her bonnet and shook her hair like a small satin flag and held the bonnet in her lap, staring at it moodily: a dull and ugly bonnet that would have to serve until the time of Kings had come. Then she looked at me suddenly.

You can have some of the money, she said. There'll be lots of it!

I don't want any, I whispered meanly and she seemed indifferent to that and got up, without looking at me again, and began unstrapping the carpetbag and going about the tiny room, setting the place in order, and putting the ragged, lavendered clothes of herself and the old woman in places they belonged. I hung back, grinning like a simpleton because I was afraid, and I grew wild inside with the knowing that there was no place I could prick her. And so I perched cockily on the carpet stool and picked my nose, lordly and mocking,

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watching as she went about these mean household chores. Far away in my aunt's kitchen the voice of Rebecca Hornbrook lifted in reproach against this world and its uses and then the even, faintly nasal voice of Aunt Sarah intervened and I knew she would be speaking of God and the iniquities of man. After she had packed everything away (there was little enough: a drawerful of camisoles and petticoats and shirtwaists) the little girl climbed into the rocker by the window and folded her hands like a country wife and rocked gently, her dark large eyes fixing me again with that inscrutable inspection.

King—of—what? I whispered.

You're not old enough to know, she said, without anger, as if she were still speaking to someone with a foolish mind.

I'm ten! I raged suddenly.

Yes, she said. I know. But it's a man's business my father is tending to. He won't even tell me all of it!

And then her eyes seemed staring at a world beyond this one, at a face somewhere in the shadows behind my head; a fierce tenderness in her face.

Abijah, she whispered.

What say?

Abijah, she said, to me now. That's my father's name. Isn't that a noble name?

That's a stupid name! I blurted and felt a-cold with fear because I knew I was talking without purpose, without any sense of what I was saying, just to strike at her. But she did not even seem to feel these stones I threw and her mouth did not even pause in shaping the words to come.

A grand, fine name for a King, she said. King Abijah! And he'll come riding back when he has done what he has to do and he'll be wearing a velvet cape—a red one—and carrying pistols—pistols of silver!

Now some of her dream had begun to lay hold on me; now I knew I had to put an end to it before it had me in a spell as deep as hers.

Come on! I said, jumping up and beckoning. I'll show you the house!

All right, she said softly, and then added politely: It's a nice house.

The cold breath of the tiny room seemed to blow us gently out

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into the high, dark hallway and off among its winding ways, so familiar to me: an old house with many secrets and some I would never share with her nor anyone. I would never show her the loose board in the little room where the old trunks huddled in the dusty light of a moon-shaped window like hunchbacked buffaloes; the board that pried up and showed the place where I hid rare things: the sea shell in a rock that I had found on the banks of Fish Creek, my bird-point arrowheads, the moldering musket ball, and the stone that I had found in the orchard spring that shone with cold moon-light when you held it in a shadow of proper enchantment; nor the bit of blue glass the color of the air before storms. I led her through the dark, rambling country house of my Aunt Sarah and my Uncle Joe and I tingled with happiness when we passed secrets that I knew she would never guess: the place behind the cold, green, flowering wallpaper in my dead grandmother's room where I had pressed my ear one stormy August night and heard, plain as doom's own pulse, the breathing of a ghost; the loose board in the parlor, behind Uncle Joe's rocker, where, when one pressed just hard enough, one would hear the bright, green cry of a frog. She could have her King and his red velvet cape and his silver pistols. I knew of a way to go out my own bedroom window and down the long roof to the branch of a giant apple tree and thence off, silent as a Shawnee, to the mid-night grass. I knew of a silver spoon in my Aunt Sarah's kitchen which, when one held the handle close against the eye, showed a tiny picture of the steamboat *Sarah Crowder* in all her spidery, white wonder. In the dining room I heard a small cry of surprise and turned to find her with a toy of mine in her hands: a little wooden man with a blackamoor's face, whose eyes rolled when you twisted his wooden head.

That's mine, I said.

But she kept it in her hand, holding it as if she had never seen a thing so wonderful in all her livelong days.

Put that down, I said. It's my toy—not yours.

She gave it to me and looked at me again and my arrogance failed before that untroubled, inscrutable regard and yet I thought I had heard the faintest of sighs when the toy left her hands. I flung it back on the table where she had found it.

My, she said presently. This certainly is a nice house.

Yes, I said. But you heard what Aunt Sarah said. You and your Aunt Rebecca will have to work.

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Oh, she said. We will. Aunt Becky's teaching me to sew, you know! And some Mondays she lets me help with the wash! When Father comes back, of course, we'll have lots of slaves for that.

We've got three! I said, stalking on before her like Lord Jack o' Dreams himself. Suse and Toot and old Coy! Coy's the best fisherman in the whole Ohio Valley! He caught a catfish that weighed fifteen pounds! He let me kill it and cut its skin off! I got blood all over me!

My father, she countered, was a steamboat captain before he went away!

I turned to her with a curling lip.

That's a lie! I whispered.

No, she said, stubbornly, softly. It's really true. It is his own boat—only, of course, he had to leave it when he went away.

Where? I sneered.

He grounded it, she said. On a bar up Fish Creek. He said high-water wouldn't get it there and no one will ever find it because nobody ever goes up there on account of all the copperheads in the rocks. And when he comes back—it'll be there—.

Shoot! I cried, waving a scornful hand. That's a big lie!

I'll take you there, she said. The first nice day. I'll show it to you. It's a beautiful boat and it's called the *Nellie Queen*. He named it after my mother. Her name was Nellie.

I turned away before she could see the wonder in my eyes, this reluctant awe before the daughter of the wandering King, and we were suddenly in the kitchen and Aunt Sarah was sipping boiling black coffee from the bone-china cup in her cradling hands and Rebecca Hornbrook was eating a dish of applesauce in the lamplight.

Well! The children! cried Aunt Sarah. Thomas, I hope you'll be polite to little Cathie Hornbrook! She's going to be living here now and I will expect you to be her friend.

Yes'm.

Take your hand away from your mouth when you speak, Tom. That's common! Just as common as dirt!

Yes'm, Aunt Sarah!

Lord, Rebecca, don't he favor the mother?

The living image! cried the old woman, and her voice, still fresh with the grief of her own circumstance, wavered at the mention of my dead mother. Oh, she was a saint on earth, Sarah Christopher!

Yes, said Aunt Sarah. And gone to a well-earned reward!

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And now she cupped her hand to her lips and cast a sidelong glance at me as she bent to the old woman's ear and whispered in a loud, hoarse breath: He *drank*! The boy's father! It was his downfall! Him and the mother was drowned in the Flood of 'Forty-seven! They say he was too drunken to save his family! Hah! Men—men!

Yes, I thought, he drank but perhaps he was a King and never knew it: a king with silver pistols and a cape of scarlet. But I grinned like a barnyard idiot and turned away from their whispering and looked at the little girl by the stove. She stood in dreadful humility, her black shiny shoes primly together and her hands laced properly before her and her dark eyes brooding over us all. And since the talk was of fathers she spoke again.

My father, she said to them, for I had already been told. Is going to be a King!

Pshaw! cried the old woman. Cathie, hush that talk!

And though she fell silent then, her eyes did not deny what she had said: darkly they persisted, repeating it to us all.

If your father is a King, said my Aunt Sarah drily, then he would have shown a mite more royalty in his nature if he'd stayed home where he belonged and taken care of his kin.

No, said Cathie patiently. He had to go South. That's part of getting to be King. I do wish people could understand that.

Aunt Sarah grunted and stared reproachfully at the old woman.

How long have you had to put up with this nonsense?

Ahhh! cried the old woman, shutting her eyes. He may have told her that, for all I know, Sarah! Lordy, such foolishness!

Why did he say he was leaving? What possible excuse could he give?

Now the evening wind rose and soughed in the little hole in the kitchen window where old Suse had tucked a ball of gingham to keep out the trickle of cold. The old woman bent and shook her head sadly.

Sarah, I never could make head nor tail of that man! Bige is good at heart—there's no denying it! But he's a queer wild one! And when he left he was talking of a kingdom in the South—the child is not lying when she repeats that! Children always repeat! 'Deed sometimes it sounded like treason to my ears!

Now she bent so that even old Suse and Toot in the pantry, slicing apples for a supper cobbler, could not hear her whisper.

Bige claims there'll be a war! she breathed, wild-eyed before Aunt

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Sarah's supercilious regard. Oh yes! He swears it's a-comin' and to hear him rave it's the time of Armageddon that will be here then! Brother shall rise up against brother! he cries. Ay, father against son! And Jehovah shall come out of His golden cloud to judge us all! Lordy, Sarah, sometimes Bige seemed like the sanest man on earth and then again—at nights when the dream would get to workin' on him—that's when he'd start his ravin'. The Kingdom, he called it. The Kingdom Come. And—well, I reckon, that's what he went South to look after—. Ah, Lordy, I think Nellie's death took him hard, Sarah! He'd been home tonight if she were alive.

My mother! said Cathie suddenly and as if she bore us some bright news from the counter at Carly Juniper's gossipy general store. She is in heaven at the knee of our Lord!

Yes, child! cried out old Rebecca Hornbrook suddenly and waddling to the little girl swept her into that oblivion of petticoats beneath her ample bosom. Ah, Lord, she is there! I know that, at least! And maybe it's better that way! Maybe it's better!

I took a cold apple from the box by the window and bit into its red skin, into the white, hard flesh and tasted the bright summer sun beneath my tongue. Cathie came and stared at the apple in my hand.

May I have an apple? she said shyly.

These apples, I said, with my mouth full, are Uncle Joe's best eating apples. Run yonder to the pantry and get Suse to give you a yellow cooking apple!

Thomas, that's selfishness! I'll not abide it! Cathie, help yourself to an apple.

I glowered when she bowed her curls into the box and fetched one out, bigger than mine and better, I knew, and sweeter, I would suppose. She did not look at the aunts when she had chosen it but smiled a little and curtsied quaintly to their reflection in the lamplight in the kitchen window and whispered, Thank you!

I stared at her, tried to stare her down, because she was only a girl and she had come into my world unbidden, unwelcome, and when my Aunt Sarah and her Aunt Rebecca had stopped looking at her she suddenly replaced the apple among the others and turning with a toss of her chin walked suddenly from the room and I heard her footsteps flying on the stairs.

Here! I cried, suddenly baffled and defeated. You forgot your apple.

But she was beyond hearing, in the upper hallway already, moving

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slowly, proudly, toward the tiny room with the cold breath, her feet far above me, her heart unassailable and virgin—ringed safely round by a dream of Kings returning.

• • •

Come set with me a spell, Tommy!

And his fingers fluttered across my face; butterfly fingers brushing eyelid and lip and cheek and chin. My Uncle Joe had been blind since nearly as far back as the time when the young men of the bottomlands—some of the bolder ones, at least—had taken passage on packets to New Orleans and gone to fight the soldier Santa Anna in some shameful war or other beyond the Red River. But Uncle Joe's blindness had nothing to do with that war—unless the Lord had punished him for his part in it; he had gone blind since then and sat alone in the parlor by the window that looked South, across the slope where the orchard went down to the meadows and the meadows at last dropped to the river shore.

And how have you been, Tom?

Right good, Uncle Joe!

I squatted on the carpet stool by his shawled knees and submitted to the visit because sometimes he gave me a silver three-cent piece when the talk was done. I feared his blind, wide eyes more than the regard of any live sight for it seemed, in truth, that he saw so much more than any of the others: the aunts and the old Negroes and the girl. He knew always when I came and stood in the doorway of the parlor, however cat-silent my footfall, and he would turn his round and somehow babyish face toward the threshold and mutter something unintelligible: a kind of challenge.

It's me, Uncle Joe!

Tom? Oh, Tommy boy! Come and set with me a spell!

And there was nothing to do for it but see it through and think hard about the three-cent piece that would buy three black twisted ropes of smoky-sweet licorice from the glass jar in Carly Juniper's General Store. I dreaded most his fingers on my face but he always did that: a butterfly fluttering of those gnarled hands, knotted and twisted as horseradishes and yet transparent as candle-wax. Those fingers were his eyes and the tips could tell a smile by the touch, or the faintest scowl or the flush of anger: He always knew my mood when his fingers were done with my face. And then he would chuckle and turn his face to the window again, the pearly eyes unwinking

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before the light of sun or moon or summer lightning and he would sit there for a time so long that the clock would speak twice in the distant hallway before he was done: tales of the past, or that old shameful war and long-gone days on the river when broadhorns and keelboats floated past like sleepers in a dream and the bullyboys played sweet flute-tunes across gold-flecked sundown evenings. And sometimes while he talked, if it was a summer night and a wind came in from the river, the white lace curtains of Aunt Sarah's genteel handiwork would blow and billow in the dusky light until they brushed his face, or even touched the naked, unfeeling surface of his staring iris and he would not even flinch, so it seemed, for his voice would go on and never stop until past the time it took the clock to speak again. And because Aunt Sarah never bothered to tell him anything, he asked, that night, about strange voices in the house.

A little girl? he said. Ain't there a little girl somewheres in the house?

Yes, I said stiffly and stared out the window at the pale yellow evening star above the winter hills.

Ahhh! I reckon there must be! Yes. I knowed it, Tommy! Because it warn't a bit like Peggy's voice.

I shivered at that. Peggy had been the only issue of his marriage to my Aunt Sarah—a girl dead so many years that even in that antique time the memory of her seemed quaint and shadowy. There was a dark, wild daguerreotype of her on the cold plaster wall of the hallway: a picture in an oval frame, and it often seemed to me as if it were not a picture at all but a window into an ocean with the lost Peggy behind it, like a drowning traveler, beckoning tragically through a porthole to us here in our snug, dry hold. She was not a beautiful girl but time had sweetened her there, and there was an hour at evening, in August especially, when the light from the window above the front door threw a patch of silver across the wall, that the lost Peggy's face seemed suspended in a crystal cup of amber wine: haunting and agonized with remembrance. Uncle Joe talked to her often in the long, pale winter afternoons: alone in the parlor. He had kept a wax doll from the jetsam of her wrecked childhood (she died of brain fever during the flood in the Christmas week of 1847) and sometimes he had used to hold the doll on his knee in the parlor and pretend to play little games with the child's ghost but Aunt Sarah had taken the doll one day and burned it and scolded him for his simpering. But Peggy would not be outdone: no,

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the shade of her would not be laid and Uncle Joe would never cease in his gentle illusion that she was there: sitting at his knee as she had done in the long, lost Aprils, chatting of pleasant things. Yet, I wanted none of that game. There were more than enough ghosts in my world. But it was a certainty to me then that her ghost was real: real as God, real as Christmas, real as fear on the wind against my windows, and more than once I had gone a-stealing down the hallway toward the parlor where he would be and heard the beehive drone of his voice far off beyond the elk's-horn hatrack, beyond the closed oak door, and when it stopped, I swear, I heard the sweet, faint prattle of a girl in shy reply.

Now, Tommy, tell me who the strangers are!

It's Mrs. Hornbrook and her niece, I said glumly. Catherine Hornbrook. They've come to live with us.

Ahhh! Why sure! That's Bige Hornbrook's sister—and his little girl! They've come to live with us, you say? Well now that's nice. I knowed Bige well! Fine feller Bige!

You did, Uncle Joe? You knew Cathie's father?

Well now I reckon so! Him and me fought at Nadagoches together! I reckon when two bully soldiers fights side by side in a war like that they're friends! Friends for life, Tom!

I swallowed and did not look at him then.

Is he—was he—a—a King?

What say?

Cathie's father! I said. Was he a King?

A king?

He grunted a little and smiled (he never laughed at me) and his big fingers thumbed the carved grips on the arms of the old Grecian chair Grandmother Christopher had fetched from England a hundred years before Noah's flood, or some such time a long ways back.

Well now, Thomas! said my Uncle Joe. He might have been! He never told me if he was! But then Bige Hornbrook wasn't the sort of feller to brag!

I glared and chewed my lip; wishing he would tell me it was all a lie: that she had lied to me in her girl's pride, but he went on for a spell, in his fashion, playing out the thought a bit.

A king of which kingdom? he said. Americky? Now that couldn't likely be, Tommy! Americky don't have no truck with kings! A king of where?

She didn't say! I snarled, mean and mocking.

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He rocked a little and his old knees stirred under the gray shawl and he fumbled a nip of snuff from the cherry-wood bowl on the sill and set it against his teeth: old and yellow as a whaler's scrimshaw, and then sat gumming it into the lip and rocking thoughtfully for a spell.

She sounds like a sweet little thing! he said presently.

She's nasty and—and common! I said softly. I hate her.

We are all God's sheep, he said. In the pasture of His Earth.

And he cocked his head faintly, inclining his ear toward the light breath of wind that seemed to stir the air of the room: I would swear sometimes he heard the sound of nightfall itself: the faint steamy hiss as the sun expired at last among the blue hills beyond the river. A moment later we both heard the carol of a boat whistle far up river, behind the darkness gathering at the last failing edge of day.

Hark, Tom! That's the *Cabinet*! It's late, boy! Light the lamp yonder before your Aunt Sary skins us both alive! She holds me accountable for lighting that lamp every night at sundown! Though how she reckons I'll know when the sun's gone down is beyond my understanding! But I know, Tom! Why, boy, in the kingdom of the blind there are many eyes! I know when a redbird flies up the lawn and perches in the willow there by the tanbark walk! She don't know that but it's true and I'll tell it to you as a fact! Just the same —do it for me, lad—fetch a spunk and light the lamp! And mind you don't knock it over and burn the house down!

I went and did as he bade me and came back with my fingers sweet with the coal-oil: like the smell of winter. And the golden glow of it shone in his smoky, dead eyes: and I thought that it was high time he fetched my three-cent piece out of his squashed black snap-purse if he was of a mind to. But he seemed turned inward wholly on thoughts and heedings of his own and when I began to question him again about Abijah and his troubling kingdom he thrust up his hand and bade me hold my tongue, and cocked his head, a-harking.

It's my little Peggy, he said gently, his voice faint and bleating with age.

I shivered and stared at the lamplight shadows in the room, shadows that were so deep and golden that it seemed they, too, had been darkened by the usage of years.

Is she—coming?

No, Tom! No—she just ran past. That's all, Tommy! Just ran

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through the house on her way somewhere! Playing a game like as not!

And then like a clarion Aunt Sarah's voice echoed through the house and the old man's face veiled over and he struggled for his cane and I helped him to the hallway. It was suppertime. I ran on ahead of him, hearing the tapping of his stick on the worn rug behind me and feeling a chill on the nape of my neck at his words. She had passed that way: gone skipping through our world in angel's play: the girl-child dead these many decades and whose tin face brooded in the oval frame above me. I dared not look at it through that dusty dark and even held by breath because I could smell it plain: the inference of roses in her wake, and pounded off, red-faced, ahead of the blind man in breathless onset toward the steaming, golden safety of Aunt Sarah's kitchen and the face of enemies I could touch and see, at least.

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I know now that it was more than her boast that had caused me to hate Catherine Ellen Hornbrook with such a scalding anger. There was an elegance about her that rose to the measure of her unyielding brag; there was the mark of royalty on her, no matter how often my Aunt Sarah might call her common. I think I knew from that afternoon she came there that I would never defeat her; that, in the end, Abijah would indeed one day come riding up the dusty river road in scarlet and with silver pistols in his belt. As for my own parents I knew that they were both something less than royalty: how much less I never knew, possessing within my memory only the barest tattered pictures of them. They were dead and moldering on the hill by Dulcie's house—gone since I was two and had been carried one morning into Aunt Sarah's kitchen wrapped in a blue and yellow quilt my mother had made, blinking and frightened from the voyage down the flooded valley in the john-boat old Major Tomlinson had fetched me in. Yet, I would think, perhaps they were Kings, too. Within the pleasant uncertainty of ignorance my imagination need mark no limits. But she who had come to challenge me there in my child's ascendancy, had no doubts about her heritage; none, at least, as shattering as mine. She remembered more of her mother than I could recall of mine and her father, within a matter of weeks, had left her with the most thrilling assurances in the world.

I avoided her in the house when I could. But Aunt Sarah, who

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would not abide the thought of sending me to the free school at Elizabethtown made me share my hourly session of reading and writing and ciphering with Cathie. She was quicker to learn than I: prompt and saucy with her sums and quick at reading. And I can remember the sour gall in my throat at the sight of her that March, standing primly by my Aunt's whispering taffeta shoulder with the quarter-lambskin Byron in her hands reading canto after canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

I don't think you're even trying, Thomas Christopher Alexander!

Ma'am?

Will you add up that sum on your slate?

And I took the slate in my hand and felt the chalk go gummy in my sweating fingers and stared, dumb as a sheep, at the whirly white ciphers in my Aunt's lacy hand.

Try it at least, Thomas! The Lord helps those that helps themselves!

And so I stared a bit longer and sucked my lip and scowled and cocked my head so that I would at least give the appearance of concentration, even though my mind was awhirl with confusion. Irresistibly my eyes stole to the hateful girl on the carpet stool besides me. And instead of the supercilious sneer I had reckoned on finding in her face I saw something of gentleness and condescension that enraged me all the more.

Cathie had no trouble with this sum! said my Aunt Sarah. Did you, child?

And that had done it. I flung the slate into the beaded cushion on the davenport and fled from the room, pounding off through the hallways to the stairs and hid at last in a corner of the attic where no one in the world but I ever came: a place where the wind lived; a place too cold and desolate even to store old trunks; a place older than the house, it seemed: a corner of Time's own cradle. It was my last asylum against the world and its plague of aunts and young strangers and my only company was the wind and the nest of a sparrow, abandoned thirty summers before, in the eaves below, a tiny chink in the slates to which I pressed my eye and looked down on our checkered farm from the very forehead of the old earth, holding my face there till the wind numbed my cheek and turned my eyeball to an icy stone. I knew that Aunt Sarah would fetch a switch and burn my legs for my impudence. (She gathered a shock of willow wands every autumn and kept them for that very purpose in the

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pantry, enough to last out a whole winter of impertinences.) No switch could match the stinging shame of the lessons, though: to have that hateful girl better at sums, better at reading, to see her small hand shape letters with the neat quill and know that she was better at that, too, and with a King for a father, to boot. I squatted on the naked rafters, under the frosted shutters, sitting atop the whole world and with them afar from me.

I had a special treasure trove between the joists: a dagger of slats and a broken Derringer. A penknife that was rusted shut but whose clotted crust, for all I knew, might be Shawnee blood. A large agate marble. A blackbird's foot and the feather of a chicken hawk. I hoarded these relics in my high estate as jealously as if they had been the fetishes of a Sandwich Islander and they were different from the things I hid in the space beneath the floor board in the downstairs hallway: being touchstones to the hope I always needed when life drove me to the house's highest retreats; talismans against the wind and the awful things it said between its teeth among those lonely latitudes. I could hear my Aunt in the rooms below, swishing angrily from room to room, crying out my name in that peculiar shrill and breathy voice that meant she was angry beyond all temperance. I knew she would never find me—she never seemed to guess I would dare come here: up the ladder from the cold hall closet by my attic room, perhaps it was a part of the house she had forgotten. After a while the house grew still and I put my eye to the chink and saw the evening star and a swinging lantern on the river and I had made up my mind to go down and accept my punishment when I heard the stealthy footsteps on the ladder. A moment later the moon face of Cathie appeared beyond the joists, in the shadows, and she clambered up and I saw that she had my slate in her hands. I was speechless and sick.

She's very mad, she said softly and earnestly. But I think if you took your slate to her and said you were sorry—that you would try to get the sum—maybe she wouldn't be so mad, Tom.

I opened my mouth but no sound came and the blood roared like a flood of river in my ears.

Of course, she added, I'll be glad to show you how to do it—before you go down there. Here, Tom! Come here! There's enough light for me to show you. See?

Go away! I wailed and she stopped speaking then and the slate fell to her side and that curious veil of protection fell across her

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face, her dark solemn eyes glowing sadly across the darkness at me.

Go away! Damn you! Damn you!

I clambered across the dusty joists toward her, brandishing the slat sword like a foolish soldier in a church pageant and her face slowly subsided into the shadows and I heard her little shoes softly finding the rungs in the darkness of the closet and she was gone.

I went downstairs and took my switching at last and ate a supper that tasted like paper and grass and would not look any of them in the eye across the lantern shine and took my milk and cobbler alone in the end, sitting at the table while Suse and Toot grumbled and fussed among the dirty dishes by the pump.

What you done now, scamp? whispered Suse.

Shut up.

She sho was mad! My my! You mussa done somepin! said Toot.

Shut up.

My what a sassy-britches! See dis chunk of cobbler I saved him, Suse! 'Deed I think I'll eat it my ownse'f!

So I sold myself to them for pastry: went to them smiling and fawning because I had suddenly grown ravenous with hunger since the others had gone, and sat on a three-legged stool by the feet of the old Negro women and gobbled the cobbler like a starved dog, while Suse poured thick cream across it faster than I could eat, and Toot sat sucking hot black coffee by the pump.

Why you so mean to po' Miz Hornbrook's little gal?

I ate, staring at the two women sullenly with swollen cheeks and smeared mouth.

Never done nothin' to her, I said. She's a stuck-up ninny!

They laughed at that and then Toot's white eyes rolled and I thought maybe I would ask her to tell me a story or make a spell before I went to bed. She would oblige when the good mood was on her and sometimes she would read the future from the shape of clinkers in the supper coals when they were cold enough to finger.

'Leas' ways! said Suse tauntingly. She may be a ninny but I don't see you gettin' no letters in the mail!

What?

Sho.

What do you mean, Suse?

Sho, said Toot. I seen it! She had it in a big amalope. Coy brung it back when he took de wagon to town dis mornin' to git de sack o'

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flour at Mister Juniper's store. Hit was in de mail! Shoot, dats de fust letter anybody got in dis house since old Mars' Joe come home from de Mexico!

Who was it from?

Shoot, boy! Don' ask me? Hit was mighty important though the way she took on when your Aunt Sarah made her give it up!

Abijah, I whispered to the mason jar of dried basil on the spice shelf.

Sho, said Toot.

Sho, said Suse.

And the wind blew and the shutter among the vines clapped the window like the wing of a wooden bird. I ran from the kitchen and searched the house till I found her sitting on the stool by the lamp in the parlor, looking at the pressed flowers in my Aunt Sarah's book: *A Garland of Girl's Dreams*. I tarried, hangdog and flushed upon the threshold: almost waiting to be asked in. She lifted that haunted face and gave me a long stare and I thought: I can bully her into showing it to me if she still has it, if Aunt Sarah gave it back to her.

Toot said you got a letter.

Yes, she said.

She said Aunt Sarah took it off you!

She nodded.

But when she'd read it—she gave it back to me, she said. She told me not to show it to Aunt Becky. It would worry her, she said.

Have you got it?

Yes.

Who's it from?

Abijah, she whispered.

And when she said his name there was a singing in her face.

I moved into the room and circled her slowly, with vast and labored indifference, knowing with a kind of stupid cunning that there would be no point in my pillaging the letter when I could not read it once it was in my hands.

What did it say? I said with bare curiosity and stood before her with hanging mouth.

Her lip trembled then and a goldness brimmed her dark eyes and she stood up and I saw the letter in her hands.

It's my letter, she said softly, bitterly. Nobody has the right to—to—.

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I won't steal it! I said cozeningly. Shoot. Did you think I'd try to take it?

She took it from me, said the girl. Your Aunt Sarah. She hadn't any right to. It's my letter. He wrote my name on it and sealed it with wax and it was me that was meant to break the seal—not her.

Please? I said, reaching out to touch her hand in the clumsiest of gestures; trying to make an expedient armistice after all those weeks of war. Just read it to me.

She stared a while longer and then snuffled and blew her nose in the ragged little lawn handkerchief that her aunt had laundered and ironed that day. Then she opened the letter and I saw that the paper was torn above the seal and I knew how roughly my Aunt had taken the letter from old Coy at the wagon that day and ripped it open.

Please, I said.

All right. I will.

And I watched while she composed herself and when her lips parted to read me the letter from the King I turned my face to the window and saw that it had begun to snow: the white flakes whirling past the black window behind the white curtains.

My beloved daughter Catherine Ellen. I am writing to you from a prairie village far from home but my thoughts are ever with you, my dearest child, and I pray our Lord to keep you safe. History is shaping swiftly and events point to an inevitable climax in our time. A storm is gathering upon our land, my dear, and when it has passed I think you may see a new nation upon this continent and you will know that I will have helped to form it—.

I closed my eyes and listened and through the blackness of my clenched lids I could see the whirling wheel of the night snow upon the window and hated her for the glory in her voice because that snow was covering the stone that marked the place where my father lay who was so much less than king.

—a time of Kings, she was saying. Yes, this nation shall belong to the gentlemen that founded it. I will come back to you when it is over and take you into the heart of that glorious new Kingdom in the South. Until then, my dearest daughter, be brave and keep Faith in our Lord Jesus and honor the memory of your dear mother. Your loving father—Abijah Hornbrook—November twentieth, eighteen fifty-five.

And when I opened my eyes she was folding the paper closed and

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fondly fingering the seal and when I went and stood before her even her fear before my grinning outrage could not wash away the starry pride that was still in her eyes.

You made it all up, I said. That ain't what it says at all!

I wouldn't tell a lie! she gasped. Not about Abijah!

You would! It's a lie! A bragging lie! And just to punish you for lying—.

It's true! It's true! she wailed, when I snatched the letter from her. My father is a wonderful father and he will be a King! Yes! It is! Give it to me! Oh, please, give it to me!

No, I said and walked to the hallway, softly tearing it into halves and then quarters as I went. Her voice wailed like a dream behind me.

My letter! she cried.

No, I smiled and went to the oil lamp on the marble-top table under Peggy's picture and dropped the pieces of paper into the chimney and watched as they smoked and then burst into flame, lighting the whole hallway to a midday brightness for a moment. And yet I kept the tiny brown circle of sealing wax, because, I thought, it might be a magic, a spell, a key to that dream of Kings after all. She was not there when I turned around and then I felt the lash of cold air against my sweating face and saw the front door swinging wide and gusts of snow spiraling in upon the fading rug.

Cathie?

I walked to the door and felt the teeth of winter on my face, on my sweating shirt and hands and saw the black shape of her small footprints receding into the soft goose-down snow-world and thought for a moment I could still hear her cries, but I was wrong: it was only the wind. I closed the door and tiptoed into the parlor and sat on the stool beneath the lamp where she had been and opened my shaking fingers and stared at the seal like a droplet of clotted blood upon my palm.

A lie! I whispered. A bragging, dirty lie.

But then I choked and gave one long and broken breath of grief and desperation because she had won. Even if she had gone forever and were found at sunup, stiff and staring on the wind-blown, snow-swept ice of the frozen river, she was victor in the end. Because even if she had made up every word of the letter, now blackened and charred in the smoking lamp chimney, she had won. Even if Abijah had never lived she had won. For I had no one. And in her heart, at least, there dwelt a King.

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In that two hours between Catherine's flight and the discovery of her absence from the house I had known the guilt and despair of every murderer since Cain. I huddled by the black, white-swirling window in the parlor with my face pressed flat against the quartered glass, heedless of the aching cold that numbed my cheek to the bone. I would be hanged, I knew, for what I had done, but hanging would be a mercy after what ghosts I should endure in the interim. Already they flocked beyond that frosty kingdom of winter: ghosts of my mother and father, ghosts of myself, the ghost of the long-lost Peggy and the ghost of God Himself. The ghost of my grandmother and the ghost, most terrible of all, of my gaunt Calvinist Grandfather Christopher, his gnarled, ancient finger hooked in accusation, his white hair awhirl about his head like Father Abraham, his wild oval mouth shaping the name of my crime. God and my dead, venerable, awful Grandfather Christopher had always seemed to me one: an old man quarreling against Time and Death and spoiled children who would not mind.

It was not until later that I learned that Cathie had taken the roan mare from the stable and gone off on it, bareback, into the storm. Old Coy came stamping to the back door and rapped, blowing his old, loose lips and rolling his eyes like wild moons in the lampshine when Aunt Sarah opened the door to him.

It's gone! he wailed against the wind that fluttered his torn flannel shirt around his big twisted shoulders. De roan mare! Someone come a-runnin', Miz Sary!

What? What say? Suse! Toot!

De roan! cried old Coy again, stomping into the kitchen with eyes a-wild. Hit was a sperrit I reckon! Hit come a-runnin' into de stable and clammered up on de roan and went off a-howlin'!

Aunt Sarah flew off into the lower rooms, hollering for Uncle Joe, for Aunt Rebecca, for the Negro women. As in every moment of crisis she had her bonnet on and her silver-mounted parasol in her hand and clumped it roundly on the floor at the end of every outcry.

Thomas! Thomas Christopher Alexander, where are you!

I came into the hallway, hands dripping with sweat, eyes dumb with murder.

Where's Catherine Ellen?

She went, I said thickly, and motioned with an awkward gesture to the front door. She run out of doors!

Ah, Lord!

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Aunt Sarah was away in the kitchen now, shouting at the old Negro. Old Suse and Toot, in the face of crisis, pretended sleep in their corn-husk ticks in the old stone slave house below the apple tree. Now Aunt Rebecca had appeared, her hair in tight wads of paper, her toothless gums agape.

She'll be frozen! Ah, God, she'll die out there! Sarah, do something!

And Aunt Sarah beat the ferrule of her yellow parasol loudly on the kitchen floor, like a judge at the bar quelling pandemonium.

Silence! Be still! All of you!

And they subsided suddenly and there was no sound but the rasping of the wind and the feathery kiss of snow against the windows.

What made her run out of doors, Thomas? said my Aunt in the silence, fixing me suddenly with eyes of glass. Thomas Christopher Alexander, answer me! You were teasing her. Eh? Speak up! It's written all over you in God's own plain handwriting, boy!

Yes, I said, with eyes closed. I teased her. I burned the letter! She ran out the front door.

Ah, I thought so! Then you will go with him and if she has frozen out there at least you can witness your own handiwork with your own eyes, Master Cain! Coy! Ah, Coy!

The old man had wandered sleepily out into the storm again and stood blindly in the heart of it, awaiting orders, the snow gathering on his shoulders and on his head like drift on the branches of a dead tree. Now he turned and came back into the open door again.

Yes'm.

Fetch the sorrel and the sledge! Rebecca!

Catherine's aunt had slumped back like a fat, swollen doll and lay in the kitchen rocker with dangling arms, her head lolling in hysteria.

Rebecca, take hold of yourself! Where would she go?

Ahhhh! Gone! Gone! Like a lamb—frozen in the field! Oh, Jesus, oh sweet Jesus, lover of my soul!

Rebecca Hornbrook! *Where would she go?*

Promptly and still brandishing the parasol as if it were the ultimate and final instrument of all safety, Aunt Sarah fetched a dipper of icy water from the bucket by the pump and flung it splattering into the old woman's astonished face.

To the boat! whooped Rebecca Hornbrook, the droplets springing and twinkling on her round pink child's face. To Bige's boat!

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Ah, yes! cried Aunt Sarah. That's a good five mile down the river road. Ain't that right?

Yes! Yes! A quarter mile above Jason Lindsay's old corn field—above the mill! Oh Lordy save us all!

You, Thomas! she whispered in a hush of violence. Fetch your coat and muffler! Fetch your mittens! Go with Coy and find her and may God have mercy on your soul!

We sailed off into the thick white midnight with incredible smoothness on the crude oaken sledge: into a storm so thick that we could scarcely see the horse's rump before us. I huddled close against the old Negro, wrapped tight in a horse blanket that smelled sharp of maleness and safety. Once under way the horse stumbled and went down on the glare of crystal and I realized with a sudden choke of dismay that old Coy had daringly taken the sledge down over the shore and out onto the frozen river itself and that like some incredible, mythical boat we were skidding at high speed down the vast ice-bound steam. Above the wind I could hear him singing and at first I thought it was a prayer or a spiritual, at least, and then I recognized it, a tune called "Old Dan Tucker" that a minstrel had sung in the showboat that had docked at Elizabethtown the spring before. It was better than a spiritual, I supposed, to keep his spirits up, like brandy: being a tune of good times and safety, while spirituals would have only made him think of the death that lay so close to us, beneath the ice. We sailed on as if in a dream and once again the horse went down, legs sprawling wide and thrashing, its mane reared into the snow-torn night as it struggled for purchase on the ice again and then went thundering on.

Yonder! cried the old Negro then and we saw the mouth of Fish Creek after a while, and he reined the horse in to shore and we went up on blessed land again and found the narrow, dipping road that followed the creek inland to where, we supposed, Abijah's steamboat was grounded on the bank. Miraculously, and as suddenly as it had begun, the snow had stopped and the moon had come out and the land lay all around us like white candy in a child's dream: fields and trees alike topped with it high as whipped egg whites and the wind that rose and fell shook great sparkling handfuls of stars off pine branches into a whisper of cold sound, earthward. As the horse carried our sledge around the bend in the road by the old Lindsay mill I saw it suddenly in the moonlight: the white stacks and forecastle of a steamboat rising in the aching, cold light of melancholy winter moon.

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Sakes alive! whispered the old Negro and whipped the horse on to the bank and we saw it plain now, atilt where he had grounded it on the gravel bank, but rising pure and beautiful in the lambent frosty moonshine, lacy and delicate as a woman's wedding gown, her decks heaped and frosted with the further elegance of snow.

Yonder! Der's a lantern a-shinin'! cried the old man and leaped to the road and wallowed away across the ruts and drifts toward the shore. I followed like one in a dream. I had never believed her tale of the boat that the wandering Abijah had left before embarking on his impossible venture and yet here it was: pure and abiding like a dead swan with its frozen webs in the ice and its proud neck still straining to the moon. We clambered aboard and found the companionway and reached, at last, the texas deck and the window to the pilot house shone and lit the snow on the texas round about and through the window we saw her lying face down among his old charts and logbooks, clutching his faded captain's cap in her blue cold fingers.

Miss Cathie! Little lady! It's us—come to fetch you home! 'Deed, Miss Cathie, you gwine freeze to death in hyer! It'd freeze de horns off a muley cow!

She was unconscious, or half so, raving and wild-eyed and flushed with fever and trickling saliva down her cheek when the old Negro caught her up and wrapped her in his own blanket and carried her down to the sledge again, his own shoulders bare to the wind's teeth. I stumbled on behind, keeping out of range of her eyes, ashamed and seeing nothing but her head on his shoulder and the blue captain's cap clutched still in her fist.

And she lay huddled with her face in the old man's shirt, breathing hoarsely and heavily and he was singing that "Old Dan Tucker" tune again at the top of his voice. We kept to the river road this time and within a half-hour the black shape of the house swung into view with every window blazing with alarm.

Cathie! cried the old woman's voice far off on the snow-quilted lawn when they saw us. Oh, my little Cathie Ellen!

And we saw her tear free from Aunt Sarah's restraints and come wallowing down through the drifts toward the gate, her arms spread and flapping like a black, fat turkey's wings, and when the sledge came abreast of the apple tree she dragged the girl from the old Negro's hands and went up through the cold, charitable silence of

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the snow's aftermath, crooning and blathering, toward the kitchen door.

Is she dead? said my Aunt in the doorway.

Ah, God! Ah, God! wailed old Rebecca and came into the kitchen warmth and tore the coarse blanket away to stare into the girl's still face.

Get her upstairs! cried my Aunt and went off railing at Suse and Toot, now aroused and blinking grumpily in the kitchen lampshine, to set kettles a-boiling, to fetch herbs from their secret jars on summer shelves. Soon the house was alive with the tingling scent of sassafras and hot mustard and sheep-nanny and tansy and footsteps went a-sushing through the halls and silver spoons tinkled in goblets.

How can I know what to do unless you tell me! roared my Uncle Joe from the upstairs hallway where he had wandered throughout the crisis in impotent circles, tapping out a little orbit of safety with his white cane. How can a blind man know—?

Hush up, Joe! Be still! Go back in your room! You're only in the way!

And he retreated into his room again and lay grumbling, toothless and impotent in the bed, wondering like a child what it was all about.

I watched them all from the safety of distance: saw the pale, naked girl stripped and steeped in a steaming hot tub of mustard-water and then lifted and dried, her head lolling like a doll's, her eyelids quivering and blue-veined as a pretty meadow stone as Aunt Sarah worked her into a flannel nightgown and packed her beneath quilts and a hot cobblestone wrapped in a tatter of flannel. At length the hubbub subsided and the house grew still except for the faint sobs of Aunt Rebecca and the wind beneath the moon and the muttering of the distant, chided uncle in his bed. Aunt Sarah had racked her parasol in the hall, at last, like a soldier relinquishing his musket for the night and then I heard her moving through the hallways and I knew she was seeking me out. And so I went to her. There was nothing more could happen to me now.

Thomas Christopher Alexander, I have something to say to you and I will make it short! There is a God who watches over each of us —rich and poor—great and humble. That child Catherine Ellen Hornbrook was taken into our home to give her shelter—her and her aunt—poor victims of a man's evil willfulness. If He chooses to let her live—she has pneumonia, you know! Oh yes! It's plainly that!

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—if, as I say, He chooses in His bountiful mercy to let her live—YOU, Thomas, may get down on your knees and give thanks to Him. Yes, YOU, boy! Because if she dies—you will be her murderer and —. Look at me, boy! No, lift up your face and look me plainly in the eye because I am saying something I want you to remember all your living days! Yes, you may thank Him if she lives! And if she dies—you may reckon on having to face Him in all His Almighty Wrath!

And she was off then, without another word, without another glance, to make tea in the kitchen, and to pour herself and the old sniveling Rebecca a glass of dandelion wine for their spirits.

As for myself I stood alone in that hall, harking to grandfathers or gods or whatever dreadful judgments rocked angrily in that high west room.

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Aunt Sarah stood like a sentry in the doorway, framed in the cold morning light of the window in the small room behind her.

Why should I let you go in there? she said stiffly, and rustled in her clothes like the harsh feathers of a turkey. How do I know you wouldn't tease that poor child even more?

I wouldn't, I said in soft beseeching.

What do you have in your cap?

I had thought she wouldn't see the cap of useless things tucked under my jacket: gifts for the sick child.

Some presents, I said.

Let me see, she said, and poked a finger inside and sniffled and recoiled at them: my marble and my rusty knife, my slat sword and the hawk's feather and the blackbird's foot.

Phew! Give them here! Gracious!

And she snatched the cap from my slack and boneless fingers and tossed them onto the hair trunk by the door to her room.

You may go in, she said. If you get down on your knees and ask forgiveness.

Yes, I—.

—and if there is any decency in you at all you will ask her to pray to God to forgive you, too, for your selfishness and orneriness.

Oh, yes, I—.

And I thrust past her into the little room that even yet held its pallid, cold breath as if waiting to speak, and crept toward the bed where

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she lay smaller, it seemed, than the dead robin in its bunting that I had laid to earth upon a sad August day when I was six. I would not have known her, coming upon her there by surprise. Her moon face was flushed and wild as a Shawnee's upon the starched, fragrant bolster, and for one terrible moment (I could not see her hands or any shape of her beneath the mountains of quilts and comforters) I held a wild child's fear that somehow sickness had dissolved her body away, that fever had done off with all of her but this poor sick mask of suffering sleep and dreams tinctured with old wives' herbs and the fumes of elderberry wine.

Cathie?

Like the quick flash of a wren's wings, her long-lashed eyes flew wide and stared deep into me. And she spoke plain and clear.

Can I have my letter?

I—there is a piece of it left, I mumbled and opened my hand and held out the King's seal and her hand flew out from under the quilt and took it and held it up to her eyes and squinted at it and seemed to find some reassurance in that, for a moment later she gave a deep sigh and looked at me again.

Is that all? she said. All there was left of it?

Yes.

Did you notice, she sang softly, what a fine script he writes?

Yes, I said. A fine script.

He kept the logbooks on the *Nellie Queen* in that same fine script. Like a schoolmaster's hand. I used to practice with the quill till my hands couldn't hold it no more and I couldn't write that script—not that fine.

A fine script, I said.

And then we both fell silent and I thought of the good morning beyond the window and hunted words to tell her how clean the razor air had been when I had gone down to gather the brown eggs, how the icicles hung dry as a gnome's diamonds beneath the yellow morning sun and the cock's blood had gone so wild with the frost that he had crowed twelve times into the face of that morning.

I never meant to—, I stammered and stumbled and was done, fallen in the first try.

She looked at me again then and smiled a small grave smile and laid the cracked little piece of sealing wax on a purple quilt square and touched my hand with hers.

I know how it is, she said. I do things sometimes—get mad—do

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awful things sometimes. I know. It's just like a wildness inside you and you don't mean it but it's done anyways. I don't blame you.

And I felt a little twinge of something strange, a whisper of anger, that she had done it for me, made grace with herself in my behalf and I could claim no pride in having begged it. I tried to remember what it was Aunt Sarah had asked me to ask her about God but it would not come to me and it seemed after a moment's reflection that it was none of His affair; that this was between us because God had never known the terror of strangers.

It doesn't matter about the letter, she said, her eyes black and grave as deep water. Because I mind what it was about—I can think of nearly every word of it by rote.

I glanced at her aunt but she seemed heedless of me there and I stared at her big hand on the arm of the softly pacing rocker, a hand large with chores, knuckles rootlike with a thousand washdays and stained with pickle spice and bluing, dyed fast against the erosion of all time, the gaunt simple gold ring pressed deep into the flesh of her finger—speckled with liver marks. She rocked gently in the yellow morning window light with her eyes veiled with her fingers and hummed an old tune against the silence.

I wish we could be friends, Cathie said softly. I don't mean I would expect you to treat me like I was a sister or anything like that. I mean just good friends.

All right, I said, and thought of the cap full of my treasures that had been too preposterous and dirty to bring her there, and they were, after all, things that she would not want anyhow. Yet I glanced toward the doorway and saw that Aunt Sarah had gone downstairs again and I thought I would risk it.

Wait a minute, I said. I brought some truck.

And I went out and came back with it again and waited till her eyes began to shine with curiosity and then I dumped the contents on the quilt.

What are they?

Treasures, I said. This feather—.

And I held it up and it moved faintly in the still air of the small room.

It's a hawk's feather.

Ah! Is it real?

Genuine, I said. I was down in the meadow below the orchard one fall afternoon. I saw the hawk swoop and take one of Uncle Joe's

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Dominick Roosters and before the critter could take wing again old Junius had him by the throat—that's the blue tick that died—had him and shook him till the blood drops splattered on the whitewash on the barn door and—and afterwards I found this feather in the dust and I know it was his and not the Dominick's—a genuine hawk feather. And here—a real marble—an agate! And these are bird points!

And I went on in eager catalog of each of these wild trifles, like the contents of the stomach of some incontinent and stupid owl and she marveled before each one and insisted on hearing its story and put each carefully back in the cap again and tucked it under her quilt and thanked me solemnly.

I seen the boat, I whispered, with the image of it suddenly there before my eyes again.

The *Nellie Queen?* she whispered with a wild, quick breath. Isn't she beautiful?

Yes, I said.

She's Abijah's boat, she said, her eyes on the ceiling in a dream I could never share. He went to Jeffersonville and gave Mister Howard the plans and stood by and watched every white-oak plank from keel to stack. He even made Mister Howard send all the way to Steubenville for the paint because he said the paint he had wasn't white enough. And did you notice the doors on the cabins? Gold leaf! Real beaten gold leaf! And that painting on the texas—that cost fifty dollars and was done by hand by a genuine artist—an old Cincinnati Dutchman with only one leg and snowy-white hair.

Cathie? crowed the old woman suddenly and the pace of the rockers ceased. She rose and came toward the bed and laid the big gold-banded hand across the child's forehead.

My goodness! You 'pear to be mighty nigh well, Cathie Ellen! Hello, Thomas!

Hello.

She stood looking at me, without anger, without rancor, as if she did not remember at all that it had been me that had done it, her eyes patient and tired and disremembering as if they had grown that way from looking down at children a long while.

My, Thomas, the way you favor your mother is a caution! Especially around the eyes! I knowed Tom's mother, Catherine Ellen! Yes, I did! And she was a fair, fine lady—as Christian a woman as ever walked this earth!

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Thomas and me are friends, said Cathie.

Why, sure! said the old woman, and I saw suddenly a strange thing about her face: that her mouth could smile but her eyes and her forehead seemed fixed eternally in perplexity. Sure! she said. Two little lambs in the world together! Both motherless! And why shouldn't you be friends! The Lord meant that to be! Yes, He did!

She cast me a little sidelong glance of tender alarm, as if she might wound me by sending me away and then she said softly that she thought Catherine Ellen had better sleep, and when we looked her eyes were already closed.

Thomas?

And I turned and saw Aunt Sarah in the doorway with a saucepan in her hand and she beckoned to me.

Did you do as I told you?

Oh, what?

Did you ask that little girl's forgiveness?

Yes.

Did you ask God to forgive you? Through her pardon?

I—I couldn't remember exactly!

And do you think He will bother if you don't show the slightest concern whether He cares or not?

No. He might—.

He might nothing. God doesn't come to people. They have to go to Him. I'll say no more though. You've been spared, I might add, and it's only because God cared about *her*—not about your poor, sinful soul! She will live. The fever passed its crisis this morning at sunup. No thanks to you though, my proud, fine peacock!

And she marched off with the saucepan in her hand like the scepter of some queen of vengeance and I was alone with whispers and time-browned shadows and the drip of icicles outside the door as the sun thawed the ice-bound house. I was alone and I was afraid again and I harked to the paced creak of her aunt's rocker and went to the room of my Grandfather and wondered if one should knock when there was really no one there. Because there was no one there. There never was. And the room smelled the same and looked the same; it would never change; when doom clapped its iron hands some night to beckon us all to gather for judgment from its cloud over the hill, that room would endure and hang there in space, though the house itself perished and went to dust and blew off down the river road with the leaves of fall; that room would always be there with my Grandfather's

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watch ticking like the heart of a bleak, white-bearded God. I stood in the little room and saw the sun, yellow-rayed among the spinning dust motes by his chair, motley in the wadded rag rug my grandmother's hands had knotted and shaped in a time before me, and for the life of me I could not remember. I had forgotten it again: what she had told me to tell Him.

• • •

She survived. But I think in that winter week someone in both of us died. She rose at last from the quilts, healed and pale as a mushroom; her dark eyes burning the more in the round livid mask of innocent, inscrutable girlhood. For a few days she sat alone in the rocker by the window in the little, gasping, cold room, with a shawl around her and a picture book on her lap. I never saw Abijah's seal again that winter; she had hidden it where God Himself could not have found it, somewhere in a crack or cranny of the little room, I suspect. As for myself, my heart and mind were in a riot of disorder. Aunt Sarah watched like a barn owl for the smallest mouse of meanness in me and I think by that time there was no reason for her to watch. Cathie had won every battle. And by now I was too frightened even to lift my voice to her, lest the high listener in his room should hear. Sometimes in those weeks when the winter seemed weary of itself and waited with an eagerness, like someone old, for the spring which is its death, I would chance upon her somewhere in the house staring at something of mine: the blackamoor doll that she had handled that first day—or an old top—or my ice skates. Sometimes she would stand for long moments, a finger in her lips, staring at it, while I watched from another doorway and I would stand there knowing she knew I was watching and I would wish she would touch it, or pick it up or even break it and not because I would be angry at her for this but because it might be a chance for me to forgive her something.

Once when I had surprised her standing by the sideboard in the dining room staring at the blackamoor toy she had suddenly lifted her eyes to my spying face in the stained, time-smoked mirror in the peeling, gold-leaf oval and given me back eye-for-eye for a long minute and then faded away into the sea-gloom of the hall and was gone. As for my capful of treasures I could never find a trace of them and I knew she had hidden them away in the same cache with Abijah's brown wax seal.

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One cold March afternoon Uncle Joe fetched his musty greatcoat from the hall antler and went off up the frozen road to Carly Juniper's store to buy the snuff that Aunt Sarah had refused him that morning when she had sent old Coy into town to shop. I listened to his white cane tapping off into the distance and when it was silent I stole to the empty parlor to look at books. When he was there I was never able to look at them; he kept me at his knees, talking and keeping him company to earn my three-cent piece. They were old books, fusty books, and dull enough except for the pictures which were of ladies and soldiers and stiff-legged deer but sometimes I would find an old letter there between the marble-edged leaves or a brown, brittle bouquet of thin summer flowers. Aunt Sarah was upstairs with Rebecca quilting and Suse and Toot were off in the kitchen baking bread and I supposed somehow that Cathie would be with them.

Tom?

And there she stood, in the doorway, skinny-legged in her long black stockings and with a green ribbon in her dark hair that seemed to set off the paleness of her face.

Hello.

May I look at a book, too?

Yes.

And I fetched another carpet stool from the foot of Uncle Joe's rocker and put it by the bookcase, beside my own. She stole to it silently and sat, tucking her skirts primly beneath her knees and brushing back a dark lock from her eyes, opened *The Christian Martyrs* and began to read. Until then I had been searching the pages for leaves or valentines or pictures but now, desperately, I pretended to be reading, too.

We're still friends aren't we, Thomas?

Sure, I said softly. I reckon so. If you're not still mad at me.

I never was mad, she said, scowling at the idea. I never was.

Well, I said. It certainly was a bad thing I did. I guess I'm just a hopeless sinner. Aunt Sarah says so anyhow.

She sighed and stared at me a while longer.

I hid the treasure, she said. The treasure you gave me.

I figured that, I said. I hope you hid them good. If Aunt Sarah ever finds them she'll throw them out for sure.

Yes, she said. I hid them in a secret place. Do you mind if I don't tell you where? It's nice to have a secret place.

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No, I said, with a wave of my hand. I don't mind. It's good to have a secret place.

She sighed again, greatly relieved, and then cleared her throat.

They're in a hole behind a loose brick in the pantry, she said. There! I've told you my secret place.

You didn't have to, I said. I don't want the treasures back. I gave them to you for your very own.

I know, she said, with a laugh that was half a breath. But there are some special friends you don't like to keep secrets from.

Aunt Sarah never let me play the music box except on Sundays and Christmas but I felt suddenly like both days were come at once and I sprang up and ran over to it and lifted the wide, shining oaken lid and fetched one of the big rattling, prickly discs and fitted it inside and pulled the lever and listened to the brassy gasp it gave as the coil gathered and the disc crackled as it commenced turning.

My, that sure is pretty! she cried as the chimes of it filled the room with booming, tinkling gold. I just love music!

And we both stared over the rim of the box and listened to it and felt happy and sad all at once because it was an old tune that Uncle Joe sang the words to sometimes: the one about the drunkard's grave.

Isn't that the grandest, saddest tune, she said, casting me a ravishing sidelong look.

Yes, I said.

Sometimes, she said, I just love to cry. Aunt Rebecca says a good cry washes the soul. Last Sunday after church she told me all about Good Friday and she said it was just two weeks off and that's when they murdered our Lord.

I don't like that story, I said.

Oh, I do, she said. I surely do! It's so grand and sad.

I don't see the sense in sad stories, I said. Ones like that, I mean.

But she seemed heedless of me and her dark eyes gleamed in a dream of it: the story from those old, whispery pages of Rebecca's black, wrinkled Scripture.

He was just a little child, too! she said. That's the *sad* part!

Who?

Our Lord, she said. King Jesus!

I never could make head nor tail of that story, I said softly. Aunt Sarah reads it to me every year.

Oh it's a grand story! she said. He was born at Christmastide—.

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I know that part.

And then just three months later—they killed him! A little baby child!

No, I said to her. He was an old man. An old man with a beard.

I beg your pardon, Tom, she said, talking to me again like she were older and I was small and foolish. He was born at Christmas and Good Friday is only April. How could anyone grow up to be an old man in three months?

I shivered again and knew that she was right so I turned off the music box because Aunt Sarah would come raving at me presently and the silence in the room was a judgment.

Suse is baking, I said. Maybe she'll give us a heel.

And she followed me to the kitchen and the air steamed with a sweetness that seemed to flower and breathe out spring.

Can me and Cathie have a heel?

Well sho! Sho!

With strawberry preserves?

She winked one wrinkled lid shut and fixed me, birdlike, with cunning speculation of a single scowling eye.

'Gainst you go and spoil your supper, you scampy trunnel-bed trash, Miz Sary'll have my hide off and hung up to dry!

She won't care, I begged, shameless with yearning before that sweet cloud of baking.

And she sliced us both heels from the new, buttered loaves: crusty without and soft as goose down within and heaped with butter and strawberries. We squatted eating and watched.

Suse was old but it was Toot that was wise and she swore to me that she had ridden on that very ark that had carried old Noah above God's vengeful floods and had baked him biscuits that first morning when the bird brought the bough of olive leaves. Yes, Toot was very old and very wise and Toot's mother Abigail had been even older, even wiser. So old, Toot said, that she used to tell about *her* mother's brother being eat up by a lion. And it was not in any circus menagerie show either but on a hill above a place called Sarah Lonnie across the ocean—before the slavers took them down the hot, yellow meadow to the sea. And Jesus marched among them, singing all the way. So, I supposed, she would know about that other time.

Suse, I said, cupping my sticky face in my palms. Was Jesus an old, old man with a white beard?

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Shucks! What you talkin' 'bout, trunnel-bed trash?

Cathie claims that He was just a little baby when they come and killed Him dead!

She had her clay pipe lighted now and I was glad of that because Aunt Sarah forbade Toot to smoke while she was cooking or baking and now she was just as bad as me. She puffed and twinkled wickedly at us both and I knew she was up to a mischief or two.

Well sho! she said. Sho he was! An' you mighty lucky they ain't come to git you yit!

Who? I breathed.

Why, them same sojers that took po' Jesus to the Cavalry! That's who!

Suse was old and she sat apart and drank coffee and looked through the almanac, heedless of words, but pondering the woodcut half-moons and Pennsylvania farmers and Mike Fink's fortunes. But it was Toot that was wise and she had been upon that hill, I knew, and so I harked well to this grim and eyewitness testament.

He was born on Christmas Day! piped Cathie, vindicated. And they killed Him dead on Good Friday! And that's just three months!

Sho! cried Toot, through clouds of white wisdom. Sho, and dat's a fack!

And then she bent and wheezed wildly through gales of unaccountable mirth.

Aunt Rebecca read me the story, said Cathie then, wiping her sticky fingers on a piece of jelly muslin. And that's a fact! It's the grandest, saddest story! she said.

Hmmph! muttered the old woman. You wouldn't like it so well if you knowed the truth! You two chil'n is just markin' time!

And we both grew still at that.

Sho! Dey come and took Him didn't they? And Him jus' a little baby? Well dey's gwine to fetch you, too! Dey's just playin' you out like a fish, little ones!

I don't care! I said with a wild, nervous wave of my hand and got up and walked stiffly out of the pantry and I was proud then because Cathie came close behind my heels like a little frightened rabbit in the wake of my braveness. I walked audaciously into the dark hallway —green and bleak as the depths of the oceans beneath that long-ago ark and the face of Peggy stared at me from the oval frame upon the faded wall. Cathie put her hand in mine and we stood watching the

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winter night gather like smoke under the hills and far away on the river road I heard the faint tap-tap-tap of Uncle Joe's white cane upon the cold stones.

They won't come, I whispered. That lyin' black devil!

She sighed and squeezed my hand and her fingers were like the arms and legs of a little cold doll.

Just the same, she said. It's mighty good to be friends with people.

Yes, I said. Especially at night.

• • •

But it was at night, most always, that I would be alone. Aunt Sarah had made it plain, from the outset, that old Rebecca and her niece should retire to the little room when supper had settled and she bade me, unequivocally, to keep in my place as well. It was a curious, hard vein in her, an old insistence on order and on some ancient family ghost of propriety that wound back through time like a fading, interminable silk ribbon into the Restoration England of her great-grandmother. Rebecca and Catherine Ellen were expected to work for their keep and when supper was settled they were to go to their room and mind to themselves. They owed us that and we, similarly, owed them the courtesy of keeping out of the circle of their own family lampshine. I think that she was just, at heart, though sometimes she seemed in life, and seems to me still, as cruel as a Moor. I remember her sitting in the pantry window with an old, brass telescope that my Grandfather had kept in the cabin of his boat on the river in the days when steam was the Devil's own joke in the river towns and farmers lined on the shore to mock the Water Walkers—sat there with the cold brass ring to her eye watching Coy and the halfwit Irish twins from Captina who were hired to help hoe the first corn, spying on them to see that every last drop of sweat was out of them by sundown when she went with the conch to the cold stone stoop and blew them in to supper. Yet, when a stonemason from Wheeling came to build the slave house, it is said, she marched among the old man and his sons through every hour of their labors, noting every trowel of lime, every crying stroke of the stone-saw, each clapboard, each last square Wheeling nail; striding primly among them with her little bonnet on her hair as if she were bound for town and the inevitable parasol in her dry, clean fingers, faintly sweet of lavender and rose water, and calculating from time to time on a ruled tablet the cost of their materials and their work until at last, when they were nearly

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done and the sandstone gleamed, fresh-hewn and white as angel's food in the sun, she commanded the old man to stop work and draw up a new contract.

Why, madam?

Why, because! she cried, as if to reproach him for a cheap deception against himself. You won't make a penny on this job when you're done! You must draw up new papers and charge me not a jot less than one hundred and fifty dollars!

Cold though. Colder than the heart of the black iron deer that stood in the front yard, and that sometimes seemed almost gentle-natured by comparison. Cold, when she would deny me the pleasure of going to the small room of old Rebecca and my new friend to chat a little, pleasant time and hear the friendly growl of the old woman's stomach like the ebb and fall of bees quarreling in an August hive. As for the two of them, they seemed far happier than the rest of us who were left to the balance of the shadowy house in isolation from them and from each other as well. Most often I would stay in the kitchen with the Negro women till they had finished redding the table and washing the dishes and pots and that was a kind of shadowed joy, for when they were not teasing me outright, Toot would be frightening me with her first-hand tales of times long gone: she had lived in the days of the Prophets: had known Jonah and dried him clean of behemoth's frothing slobber on the very day he had emerged and she had seen the sad core of the apple outside Eden, marked plain with the small, sad teeth of the woman on the one side and on the other the place where Adam had eaten. In fact, it seems to me now that Toot meant no fiction in her accounts of these things: I think she had lived them through to believing in the black, throbbing nights there in the guttering tallow twilight of candleshine in the slave house.

Sho!

You seen that, too! Well, I declare!

Sho! Seen hit clear as I see dat cream pitcher yonder! And nary one of dem lions so much as lifted his lip to Daniel! And who you think it was dat cook Dan'l his supper dat night when dey let him out of dere?

Who? I would whisper, knowing, but wanting to stretch out the sweetness of that scary telling.

Me! Dat's who! Biscuits with apple butter! Dried corn stewed in cream! An' a fine slice of ham—fried to grandness!

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Can I have an apple?

Sho.

And she would let the fallen word lie and move industriously about her redding chore till my hand opened to take it from the box and then she would resume her little teasing with consummate timing.

Sho. Take an apple. 'Cos, you know what may *happen*!

My fingers would close, empty, and I would lift my shaggy head and stare at her, moon-faced with alarm.

What?

Sho. Take an apple. An' take yo chances on gittin' the *snaky* one!

I would be far from the apple box now and Suse who was not clever enough to tease would giggle from the shadows where the candlelight did not fall, behind the stairwell, sipping her black coffee and wrinkling her lip over Toot's game.

Sho! Gwan! Git one! You heard me tell dat tale las' night! Hit was Eden and dat apple looked jus' as juicy and red as the one you was about to eat! And li'l Miss Eve, she picked it—.

That's not a real story.

Sho it's real! I was dere, boy! I seen it! And it was a mighty sore temptation not to pick up dat core where dey flung it and take a bite my own self.

I regarded the cluster of red apples in the old salt box.

Are they *all* snaky apples?

No, she said. Just one snaky apple in de box.

Which one? I whispered, and she giggled and the candlelight laughed, too, with shadows, and the sunny shape of its dancing finger was a mocking, too.

In every windfall, she said suddenly, dere's one snaky apple. Dat's why tree apples is so special. 'Cos dey's no snakes can climb a tree but when an apple's lying there sunnin' itself in de grass dere's nothin' to stop a copperhead from walkin' right up to it and givin' it his curse.

Does he bite it?

What you talkin' 'bout! Bite it! Snakes got no teeth for bitin' apples! He crawls over it and *twitches* on it and when he done that he goes on back to his hole in de rocks and he don't bother none of de other apples in de windfall! Cursin' dat one apple is all he can take for one day. Hit's a strain!

I stared at the apples till they seemed to droop and fall into a blurred and disordered design like melted wax.

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If you was to tell me *which*, I whispered, I wouldn't eat *that* one.

I ain't got de gift! she said and then subsided, carefully measuring out the time so that each part of her joke would come dramatically and in full effect.

—but Suse does, she added after that long spell of stillness. 'Cos Suse is the seventh child of a seventh child and Suse has de second-sight!

Tell me, Suse! I said, going to stand before her.

And delighted that Toot had let her be part of the teasing game Suse would rock furiously and be gasping with joy and hissing with wheezy winds of catarrhic, silent laughter like a gaping turtle, her toothless gums shining like tallow in the candleshine.

Sho. Gwan and take a chance. Sho. Eat dat apple and have Jehovah lash you from Eden with a pine-thong!

And I would go appleless away, and watch Uncle Joe, his blind, pink face lifted to the night-darkened window in the parlor and amuse myself by wondering how a blind man knows sun from moon or tells starlight from the burning wink of fireflies in a river dusk.

Since Cathie's sickness I had felt nothing toward the strange little girl but a kind of feverish curiosity, a sickly solicitude. I thought about her constantly and I even began to share her unceasing dream of Abijah and his high, proud returning. I was certain that I stood a little better in Aunt Sarah's regard since this change of heart and I was sitting on a stool in her room one day watching her winking steel needle go in and out of a quilt square like a dolphin playing in a red sea and I suddenly began to pour it all out to her.

Cathie and me is the best friends in the world, I cried. She can play with any toy of mine and I don't care a bit! My my, it certainly is strange how different you get to feel about people once you get to know them, ain't it, Aunt Sarah!

Don't say ain't.

Isn't it.

Not so special, she said. I don't feel that's so special true. Some of a body's first feelings are right. But a body has to learn to let the will of God have its way. We can't let our own feelings run our tongues.

I sat very still, not frowning with puzzlement, not showing anything on my face, because I was so terribly mixed up with what she was getting ready to say and I wanted her to finish it.

It was natural, she said, for you to resent the stranger in the midst.

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Old Rebecca had been helping her quilt that afternoon but suddenly Aunt Sarah had sent her off to the parlor to dust. Quilting, in the end, was more play than work and work was the board and rent that Rebecca Hornbrook paid in that house.

I just love Cathie, I said, reckless with a fullness of feeling, and Aunt Sarah's needle halted and shone like a steel tooth that had paused in chewing, and she fixed me with a long, quiet stare.

No, she said. I'll not have that kind of talk.

I gulped and stared at the floor boards, grinning foolishly.

No, she said again. I'm going to raise you as my sister would have you raised, Thomas Christopher Alexander. To know your equals and to accept them and not to mingle with commonness.

Is it bad, I whispered, for Cathie to be my friend?

No, she said. But you must remember that her people are common. Her mother was no better than a gypsy on the river roads. Her father is a rascal and a dreamer and a ne'er-do-well who walked off and left his sister to mind his daughter while he went to the prairies to help start a War.

A War?

Yes, a War. I don't know what nonsense she'll tell you. Bige Hornbrook was always queer as a boy. And when your Grandfather was on the river he often said that a man like Bige Hornbrook was more danger to rivermen than a sawyer in mid-channel. Many's the night he'd take his boat through the narrows with every lantern and candle on her snuffed out, black as the inside of a whale's belly, and him out on the texas deck shouting the Lord's Psalms in a voice that would raise the dead. Though they'd be soon glad to go back to sleep again for it was a mockery—a shame and a mockery! He meant no righteousness in his reading! Like as not it was to beg God's pardon because he had thrashed an octoroon to death in the boiler room. Your Grandfather told that and no one questioned him. No one ever questioned your Grandfather's word—not on the river or anywhere else for that matter for he was a man of God and he treated his niggers as mortal beings and never raised his hand to one in forty years of boating. Never. So, as I say, Thomas, there's the mark of meanness and of commonness on the Hornbrooks. I took them in as I would a starving gypsy on the river roads. I would do that for a dog. But they are common and I want no one in this house speaking of love—except God's love and that's our duty to Him not them.

She paused and lowered her eyes to the quilt and the needle re-

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sumed and the soft whisper of her taffeta skirts was like a breath beneath the quilt.

They are servants, she went on. Rebecca and the girl are servants. No, don't frown like that—as if I had said something cruel. I did not make their condition in life. God had His reasons for that, not I. I did not make that evil match of which the poor child was issue. It's not my fault that Bige Hornbrook is a fool and a dastard. They are servants because that is the makings of Providence and if it were not for me they would be hawking brass buttons and thread on the streets of Wheeling. They are servants. Mark that, Thomas. And mark it well!

Yes, I thought later in the house, that is true and I had been right from the first and yet there is something dangerous here: something that I must be careful over, because if I drive her away again that will be a sin, too. Yes, I thought, she is common but I have already said I would be her friend and I have given something of myself that I cannot take back. But something old and evil and musing itched and stirred in me again: I could almost feel it in my loins: perhaps it is there (in the body's own Eden) that such judgments and decisions ultimately lie: in the loins.

• • •

Winter was thin and sour upon the land: old and pinched, and the sun strained to pierce it and yet spring had not yet come and everything seemed breathless and lackluster in that solstice interlude. Cathie and I had gone to play in the orchard and the wild, dead wind had blown all that day and shaken the black twigs of the apple trees above us.

Do you remember your mother and father?

No, I whispered, not looking at her face.

I remember my mother! she cried with shining eyes, her nervous, white fingers plucking briars from her black cotton stockings. Yes! My mother was the most beautiful woman on the whole river!

I did not look at her because there was suddenly such an uncontrollable evilness in my mouth.

That's a lie, I said softly and chewed a bitter twig from the apple tree, tasting the greenness that already lay within it, listening for spring.

It's not a lie! she said, standing up and tossing back the dark curl that fell across her eyes, wild and stricken suddenly. You just ask my

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Aunt Rebecca, Thomas! Ask your Aunt Sarah—*she* knew my mother!

And your father worried her to death, I said, sick at myself and yet unable to stop.

Thomas! How can you say a thing like that! I thought that we were friends!

Sure, I said. We're friends. *Half*-friends!

She stood stock still, and straight as a stick, her black-stockinged legs close together and her thin, pale wrists dangling from the sleeves of the dress that was too small for her: the one her aunt had made over from something a cousin had given them.

You just dasn't believe in anybody, she whispered in a breath that was hollow with dread. Oh, Tom!

Just the same, I said in a voice that seemed not my own: but some snatch of evil conversation overheard in a dream. Your father is really a fool!

And it was not till a full moment after the stone had struck me between the eyes that I realized how deeply I had wounded her. She sprang back gasping but I was swifter and we went down together in the dead dry grass and she struggled like a fish beneath me when I caught her wrists and pinned them to earth.

I'm glad I did it! she whispered through furious, clenched teeth, and it was all I could do to hold her there, listening to the mingling of our harsh, furious breathing, and feeling the trickle of blood down my nose like the summer tiptoe of a ladybird.

I'm glad! I'm glad! she wailed to the wind, but stopped fighting to be loose and I thought miserably to myself: It's nothing really, being stronger than her because she is only a girl.

You could have kilt me! I yelled.

I wish I had! I wish I had! I hate you! she cried, struggling again now, straining her face from side to side and biting her lip in shame. I *will* kill you if ever I get the chance!

I snickered and let her free then because I was frightened: I had never seen her angry before. And I stalked cockily to the welling spring in the worn cup of sandstone by the embracing roots of the oldest tree in my Grandfather's orchard and then, squatting, with my back to her still, thrust my face into the aching-cold water. When I turned to her again, holding my bandanna to the stinging welt on my forehead she was sitting, cross-legged, like a wild, slim Buddha in the winter grass, staring at me with calm and furious eyes.

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If it wasn't for my Aunt Sarah you and your Aunt Rebecca would be selling buttons and thread on the streets of Wheeling!

Her face did not flinch, nor the dark eyes lower from me, though her underlip seemed to draw up a little into the red shadow of her mouth.

Just don't ever forget that, Catherine Ellen Hornbrook! You and your high and mighty ways! Why, when you first come to live with us this winter you had everything you owned in that stinkin' old mildewed carpetbag! Everything you owned!

She still said nothing and her face betrayed nothing except the barest sparkle on the rim of her lower eyelid and I could not be sure that it was a tear.

Everything! I roared, marching up and down in the grass like a lord of the valley. And you told me that day that your father was going off to be a—a King! Lord- amighty! Where did the King go, Catherine? Where is he? Where's King Abijah?

And I stood before her, fists on my hips, mocking and sick at heart.

You and your aunt, I said softly, are just servants, Catherine Ellen Hornbrook!

And she glared, stricken, speechless, her dark pupils spreading like the feather of a tiny, dark bird, her clenched knuckles a-shine.

Servants! Servants! I yelled, knowing that I had touched her at last.

And I thought I would be sick at my stomach with the sound of my words.

Servants! I cried again, choking, and she whirled and ran off among the spidery black lace of the apple trees in that cold time before the spring, the dead time, and I watched her run through the grass of the long river meadow toward the distant house and I stood by the stone fence my Grandfather had fashioned and yelled it into the dead, winter wind until my throat ached and filled with the sourness of defeat. In the hollowed stone where the spring water trickled from the hill and gathered like a cup of sky I squatted again and stared down at the wild face mirrored there: peering back at me like a garden god among the winter branches. And I counted the droplets of red as they broke in that other sky and stained that water and that sky, reddening it. I flung myself to earth and bit into the mushroom-tasting earth—the land racked with winter and tired of itself: tasting the earth as I bit into it: old earth, tasting of an old season: like kissing the flesh of someone rocking and tired and mumbling, tooth-

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less and slack-cheeked, counting clock-ticks and waiting for Death's tap upon the pane. I screamed and wept until my jaws ached and my teeth were cold.

I hate them! I hate them!

And yet I could not name the ones I hated and she was only a girl and the only one I had to play with, the only one I had ever had as friend and I had to hate her, too. And she would survive it all. And endure. Because even now I could hear her far voice in the yard above the slave house, chasing the old hound and spending her wild laughter on the wind.

• • •

They were all there, on the counterpane in my attic room: every one of those special treasures, except the hawk's gray feather and it had blown off onto the floor. I fingered them one by one, still stinging with anger and shame, still feeling the throb of the bruise of my forehead. And I could not guess, for the life of me, where the magic of them had gone: these things that she had given back to me.

Thomas, have you been fighting?

And Aunt Sarah was there behind me.

No'm, I whispered, shamed and ashamed. I fell. Me and Cathie was running in the orchard. I hit my head on a stone.

Catherine Ellen?

And I saw her then, standing behind the expanse of my Aunt's billowing crinoline: a hateful, suck-finger girl with mocking in her eyes.

Is that true, Catherine Ellen? Did Thomas fall?

Yes.

Say "yes ma'am" when you speak to older women. That's manners.

Yes ma'am. We were playing touch-tag in the orchard, she continued blandly and without even the passion of falsehood. And Tom caught his foot in a root and went a-tumbling.

Come yonder, Thomas, and let me put some hartshorn on it!

And I went with her to her room and let her dab it with the stinging rag of choking spirits and then she left me and went downstairs and I wondered how to face her: Cathie. And then she appeared suddenly in the doorway and stood staring at me.

I put your things on your bed, she said.

I glared and sucked my lip like a fool. She stood staring a while longer.

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I couldn't find one of the arrowheads, she said. I think it fell through a crack in the floor.

It don't matter.

I could hear her breathing quietly and I could smell the little-girl, soap smell of her.

She knows we lied, she said suddenly.

What?

Your Aunt Sarah knows, she said. I can tell. She knows we were fighting again. I only lied so she wouldn't punish you.

Yes! Yes, and I suppose that makes you some kind of something wonderful! I suppose you think that's mighty high and mighty of you! I don't need your lies!

Tom, what you said is so.

I don't need your protection!

It's true, Tom, she said, numbly, dumbly. About Aunt Rebecca and me. We're just servants here. I hadn't any cause to be so mad!

I fell silent then and stared miserably at a little china boat full of brooches and pins on Aunt Sarah's dresser scarf. Lord, that was the terror of it: every time my hatred for Cathie came out clean and bare something would rise up to tell me that it wasn't really us against each other but us against them; they'd force us always into a together-ness despite ourselves.

I forget sometimes, she said, her voice near a soft singing: husky and windy with the dream within her. Sometimes I forget that me and Aunt Rebecca are just servants here. Sometimes I get so proud thinking about how it will all be when he comes back that I think that time is come—I half think it's here already and Abijah is back and we're together again on the *Nellie Queen* and he is King and we go sailing to his Kingdom.

I sat down suddenly in a rocker and stared out the window at gray March meadows and listened to the rising flow of wind that had suddenly ceased in its fitful gusts and now coursed steady across the earth.

Do you really think, I whispered, that he'll come back?

Oh, yes! Yes!

I could fight it no more: it was round me now, that dream: it had wrapped me silently through those lonely months until its gentle ivy had sent tendrils into every stone and cornice of my mind.

Tom!

Yes?

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Could we be friends—again?

Yes.

Oh, Tom, I just got so mad! I'm sorry I hit you with that stone!

She ran over and stared at it, her bland, smooth brow furrowed with womanly solicitude and she stretched out a forefinger and probed the flesh to either side.

Does it hurt awful?

I shook my head manfully and drowned in blushes.

My my! she said. It's a caution what a body will do when they're mad.

It'll go away, I said, waving my hand like an old soldier.

I met her eyes then for the first time in long moments.

I'm sorry I said them things, I said. I don't know why I do!

I knew though that the treasures were gone: there was nothing to give back to her: they were just things now. Nothing could bring that back. And she did not ask for them and that night after supper I buried them all in a hole in the thawed black earth at the corner of the house by the puzzle tree.

• • •

The wind persisted, like a soft, quickening tide. Most always in my childhood I remember loving to hear the wind: at least when it was the common kind of wind that seemed to play around the eaves: quickening and falling and quarreling with itself and making a many-sound like the telling of a tale. But the wind that March was unvarying and mounting like a rising, desperate sigh and I hated it.

How are you feeling, Rebecca?

Eh? Is that Bige?

It's Sarah, Rebecca. Do you think you could take a little mutton broth tonight?

Sarah? Who? Ah, Sarah! Ah, Lord bless you, Sarah!

Rebecca had fainted that day in the meat house with a twelve-pound ham in her arms and gone a-sprawling among the rakes and hoes and it was Toot that found her: babbling like a fat, foolish baby about strange times and long-gone names, one side of her round, blameless face puckered and drawn down like the melted face of a wax doll held too close to an open oven door. It took all of us to get her indoors and to fetch her upstairs to bed and all the while she was dead weight in our hands and yet as soft as a great bag of goose down.

Bige? Is that you Bige Hornbrook? Now where's Nellie?

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Nellie's dead, Rebecca! Get hold of your wits! This is Sarah Christopher! Gracious, Rebecca!

Sarah? Who? Ah, Lord bless you, dearie! You're so good to me!

Everyone was in the hallway behind Aunt Sarah: myself and the Negro women and old Coy. Uncle Joe stood and hollered from the foot of the hall stairs, hammering his cane on the last step, demanding to know when supper would be set out on the table. I did not see Cathie until Aunt Sarah turned and herded us all downstairs like sheep and came railing and shouting at Uncle Joe to be silent. Cathie had been standing far behind us in the shadow of the doorway to Aunt Sarah's room, her face gone to fish-belly whiteness.

Is she dead? she whispered to Aunt Sarah. Is Aunt Rebecca dead?

No, she is not dead, Catherine Ellen! Your Aunt Rebecca has had a sinking spell. I've got to fetch Joe his supper before he shouts the house down. You go tend her.

And she left Cathie there on that threshold of dread and drove me before her down the steps into the hallway.

What's wrong? yelled my uncle. Why ain't supper laid out?

Hush! Hush, you old fool! Rebecca's had a stroke!

A stroke? Oh, indeed now! Oh my, that's a pity!

He seemed overcome with genuine shock and sat down suddenly on the floor beside the hallrack, clutching his cane like a shepherd's crook and blinking his blind, white eyes.

Get up, Joseph! You'll catch your death and I'll not have two sick fools in my house at once! Get up or I'll pack you off to the Home.

It was his mortal dread: his perpetual dream of fear: that he would be sent to the Old Folks' Home at Wheeling and she was always quick to use it like a stick upon him when he balked at this or that.

My my! he kept repeating, over and over, at meal time. Ain't that a pity! A stroke!

Hush and eat, Joseph!

It was a kind of secret wonder: his eating. Though he was blind, his fingers moved with an old and almost courtly politeness among the china and silver: pinching a biscuit delicately from the plate, finding the apple butter with the other hand: his fingertips imperceptibly brushing things, naming them by the heat of them: I would sometimes think that his fingers had noses, to watch them sniffing and nuzzling among that veritable crockery shop of gravy boats and sugar bowls and coffee cups. Yet he never spilled so much as a

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drop of gravy on his clean shirt, not so much as a crumb of bread: he was neat as a shrew. Though now tonight he seemed unnerved and slopped cream on his trouser leg and dropped a biscuit in his lap and I think that even as a child I knew why: because he was old and had felt the settling of time's frost upon him.

Catherine Ellen, I would like to have a little talk with you after supper. Thomas, Joseph—you will leave the table as soon as the meal is finished.

And we obeyed and went but I hid in the hallway and heard every word of what she said despite Uncle Joe who set the music box to chiming in the parlor to ring away the mood of dissolution which had chilled him at supper.

Catherine Ellen, said Aunt Sarah.

Yes'm.

Your Aunt Rebecca has had a stroke.

What is a stroke?

It is a kind of brain fever, I think. No—I'll not say. I'm not a physician. I can only say it's some act of God's Providence. She is—.

Is she sick bad?

Please don't interrupt me, child. I know this is a hard thing for you but I want you to let me say this.

Yes'm.

She is sick abed. She—.

Will she die?

Let me finish. *Gracious*, Catherine Ellen!

Yes'm.

How can I answer a question like that? Only God knows that. He will decide that hour—for her—and for you and me, as well. But no matter. That's apart from us. I just want to say now that I think it is your duty to take care of her while she is infirm.

Yes'm.

You say yes'm but I wonder if you know what Duty is.

I love my Aunt Rebecca, said Cathie, and it was long years after that I was to hear that same faint choke of desperation in her voice.

Yes, you love her. Of course, you do. She is all you have.

Yes, she sighed, and the wine of courage was warm in her again. Until Abijah comes back.

If he comes back, child. And that I sorely doubt.

Oh, no! You mustn't say that!

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It is a little hard to set in my own kitchen and have a child of eight impudently tell me what I shall or shan't say.

And she paused, waiting for Cathie to say that she was sorry but she did not, and with my face blind in the corner of the wall there, behind the corner of the door, I could see her face in my mind: small and stubborn and scared.

Now may I finish, Catherine Ellen? Have I your permission to finish speaking in my own kitchen?

Yes'm.

Thank you. I was going to say that whatever else you think about me—however you may think of me as hard and mean and crotchety —you know that I am a Christian woman. You know that I live by my religion and the religion of my sainted father. Duty, my dear. I saw it my Duty to take you and your Aunt in when your father turned you into the roads. I would do it for a gypsy on the river road. For a dog.

Far off in the house now she had commenced to sing: old Rebecca, and suddenly laid there before us was all her happy, country youth, for it was a ringing, rousing good-time tune that old-timers still sing at country fairs and in the lampshine of minstrel boats and Aunt Sarah stopped and fell silent, smiling thin-lipped as if she had known how common Rebecca was from the start.

Well! she said with a little sarcastic laugh. "Old Dan Tucker." My, that's a pretty tune to be singing when a body's carried to their death-bed.

Is she—!

Hush! And mark this moment well, my little lady! And pray to our Lord that when you are borne to your last sheets you may have led the sort of life—.

Why is she singing?

—that will bring to your last breath a hymn in His praise.

And she came over and shut the door against the sound and I had to press my ear close to the crack now to hear the rest of what she was saying to Cathie there by the cooling oven.

—I will try to patch up the harm that your elders have done you, Catherine Ellen! I will try to set you on Duty's path! And to begin with I expect you to take complete charge of your Aunt while she is sick. If she needs setting up with o' nights—you must do that! You must take her her meals. You must bathe her. You must—.

She's calling my name now, ma'am.

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You may go to her when you've sworn that you'll do your Duty by her, child!

I swear! she whispered and fled like a faint dark shadow through the hall and I listened as her small shoes trod softly and unfailingly up the stairway of night and were gone. Far above me, above that gaunt tower of taffeta and twinkling jet I saw my Aunt Sarah's face in the lamplight of the hallway and, like the painful squeeze of sap from some dense winter wood, tears were slowly trickling down her cold cheeks.

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It seemed that the wind that had risen that month had come like a rider to bear her off: it was Rebecca's wind, one might say. For as it steadily rose through those nights her own lamps went winking and failing down the dark and it seemed that all the fever and life that ebbed slowly from her went into the body of the little girl and gathered there in those hot and desperate eyes.

Here, Aunt. Drink this.

Eh? Who's that? Bige?

It's me, Aunt! It's Cathie! Drink this—it's good for you! There!

She would do anything you told her. I think if Aunt Sarah had come storming into the room and beckoned to her to be off downstairs about her dusting she would have risen somehow and dragged her numb, slack self off down those steps with a good will, humming some outrageous old mountain tune as she went. As it was, Aunt Sarah came twice daily (no more—no less) and stood in the doorway with her arms wrapped in her apron to the wrists and asked how the patient was and if there was anything she might need from town and would stand while the old woman got her head turned and fixed Aunt Sarah in her watery good eye and smiled a half-smile and mistook her for a drunken river rouster dead for forty years and Aunt Sarah, offended and mute, would bow politely and withdraw again. I stood by helpless and chewed my knuckle and wondered why I could not weep and felt the ache and throb of some old loss of my own that I could not remember. And suddenly in the clear, high, cathedral vastness of the night she would life her voice again and commence singing.

Raining raining, cold stormy weather! In comes the old man drinkin' up the cider!

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Hush, Aunt! Oh do be quiet! You'll wake them all! Oh please, Aunt!

And I would have started up at the sound and dug my fingers into the whispering quilt squares and lain shaking for a while, listening to the rest.

Get out of the way for Old Dan Tucker! He's too late to get his supper! Oh and will we ever dance! Jason? Jason, will you fetch the fiddle? Ho, dearie, you mustn't kiss me here! Mama will see!

Never a sound, never so much as a whisper from Aunt Sarah's shut-up room, but even that stillness was tacit with a kind of violence. And yet I think she understood—perhaps was even moved by it—perhaps her silence was an answer, a blessing, a farewell. For though her whole soul must have recoiled at these wild night echoes of cotillions and brandy and dances under the river moon: though she must have heard in these fragments of Rebecca's last soliloquies the shameless hammer of hussy heels and the thrashing of the boots of the men from Shawneetown and Louisville and the keelboatmen from down under the hills in the Chickasaw Agency, she felt stirring in her heart and mind some old, long-stilled reverence for Life and Death. And perhaps she was reminded that all her own days might be sung of and ended and forgotten in a few loose verses cried out to a silent house.

And though she had forbidden it, I would creep out and go the cold length of the hallway in my bare feet and whisper to the girl from the threshold: Can I do anything to help?

She would turn her face to me, a livid, vivid mask of desolation and shake her cheeks numbly.

I'll take care of her, she sometimes whispered, but, more often, would say nothing and turn her eyes to the yellow mask in the candlelight again. Once I crept into the room and stood beside her and reached out and took her hand and tried to squeeze it, but the gesture failed somehow and my hand fell to my side again: lank and helpless. But she wanted to talk.

I wished she wouldn't carry on, she said with a dry tongue.

She don't know, I said. She can't help it. Lordy, Cathie, she must be awful sick.

I just wish she wouldn't sing those songs, whispered Cathie, her eyes widening and the dark slits of her nostrils a-quiver like a good mare's.

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They're just songs, I said.

No, she said. They're common.

They're what?

They're common, she said. I know what your Aunt Sarah must think when she hears her sing those songs! They're bad songs! My Aunt wasn't bad!

I couldn't think of a thing in the world to say because they really were the most common river-bank tunes in the world; the kind Stickney's Minstrels used to sing on the *Sensation* and Mister Emmett's black dandies and their banjos in the good-time days.

Is that you, Bige? General Jamieson? Why, bless my soul! It *is* General Jamieson! Bige, run and fetch the demijohn of peach brandy from the trunk yonder! Gen'l, you must be chilled to the bone!

General Jamieson had been a thread in the cloth of legend in the bottomlands, an old soldier through no more a general than I was, but a soldier none the less and dead and gone to lead his last army of worms in a time before my mother's childhood even: a man of stiff and starchy temper, I would suppose, from the tales they spun of him: less than five feet tall but fierce as a hummingbird with a great snow-shock of hair like Old Hickory and a tomahawk scar in his forehead that he could put his thumb into up to the second joint. But a ghost now and yet she saw him and made a place for him in that final room of her life, a last warm country hospitality.

Bige? Where's Nellie? Bige? Eh? Eh? Who's that yonder in my pantry? Is that those young Lindsay scamps? Ha! I might have knowed it! And I suppose you heard I'd made some seafoam candy this mornin'! All right! All right, I say! Help yourselves, children! There's the lambs! Ho! Ho! It's night already and time to light the candles! Where, where do the days go? Life is a dream! A dream and we all wake up! A-l-l-l- wake up!

I wish she wouldn't shout like that.

Aunt Sarah understands. She knows she's ter'ble sick, Cathie.

No. She don't understand. She hears her talk that way—yelling the names of all those people—all those common people. I just wish like anything she would be still!

Why 'pon my soul! cried the old woman with a voice like a hickory fiddle in the moonlight of her bed. Here it is broad day again! Where, where do the days go? Merrily merrily merrily merrily! A dream is all! 'Pon my soul—'pon my soul—.

And suddenly Cathie moved forward in the moonlight and it

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flooded her face suddenly and I saw it twisted and anguished and dry-eyed with it.

Shut up, Aunt!

Bige?

Be still, Aunt!

Cathie! I whispered. She's ter'ble sick! You mustn't!

Rainin' rainin' cold stormy weather—in comes the old man—!

Aunt! Be still!

And with an incredible and almost airy deftness her small hand went out and struck the old woman's numb, slack cheek and then both hands flew to her gaping mouth and she stared, helpless and stricken, at the thing she had done.

Cathie! whimpered the old one. You never used to hit me when you was little!

Oh, Aunt! Aunt! Forgive me! Forgive me!

Cathie! Little Catherine Ellen! crooned Rebecca, and it was all forgotten and forgiven now. Run yonder, child, and help yourself to 'lasses cookies and a cup of milk from the pitcher in the ice house! There's a lamb! And, Cathie? Fetch another candle, dearie! These winter days it gets so dark so soon! So soon!

Cathie stood frozen, speechless and slumped into her hands, shaking and sobbing with a blessing of tears. And suddenly Aunt Sarah had appeared in the doorway in her nightdress and cap, her jaws wound round with a cloth like a cadaver in her own right.

Thomas, get yonder to your bed! You disobeyed me.

But—she—.

Do as I say, Thomas!

But she needs me! When she's gone she won't have anybody! Neither of us has anybody!

• • •

When we are older the death of someone close is an agony—but it cannot dream to touch the epic and classic tragedy that death is to a child. When we are older, part of us goes when someone we love dies. But to a child a god is gone.

In the last few days Rebecca seemed to subside into a glum and puff-cheeked retrospection and, having demanded that her old spectacles be wiped in muslin till the tiny lenses were clear as a body might want them to be to watch for General Jamieson, or the dream children or the Dark Rider upon that wind-blown road, lay mum

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and pensive with the glasses pinched on the end of her round nose and looked at none of us and waited.

How is she? Aunt Sarah asked Willie Curtis, the doctor from up the hill.

Gonter die! he observed and added a fresh wisp of black tobacco to the quid which hung in his udderlike cheek.

There's nothing we can do?

She'll not last the week, I say! he snapped and flicked dust from his stovepipe and was gone up the road to the house of his sister and a dipper of applejack to save him from the damp.

Then, said my Aunt Sarah, that is no room for a child! Stay here in the kitchen, Thomas! I'll fetch Catherine Ellen down here and stay with Rebecca till the end.

An end, one might suppose, that was far off-riding to judge from her singing which, now, suddenly and almost as if it had surprised herself, roused and briskly caroled through the house.

Go tell Aunt Sally! Go tell Aunt Sally! Go tell Aunt Sally, the old gray goose is—.

Hush, Rebecca. Lie still. It's Sarah! Everything is all right. Catherine Ellen, run yonder.

No'm.

Catherine Ellen, mind now! Run downstairs and play with Thomas. I'll tend Rebecca!

No'm. I'll not. She's my Aunt. I'm obliged to stay with her.

Catherine Ellen, this is not a time for impudence. Now mind me.

No'm. I'll not.

I listened in the hallway with my ear at the foot of the stairs for I was the sneak-o'-the-world and would have eavesdropped on God Himself if I had been sure where His quarters were and would have learned who was planned to be born that day and who to be taken away. Cathie was like someone old with the voice of a child: she would not go; I knew that flames would not have driven her from that room and Aunt Sarah knew it, too, and retreated before it as she had never done before and would not soon do again.

And as if this victory were insufficient, Cathie, moved by some strange dark need, stood still on the threshold and told Aunt Sarah why it must be so: that she should stay.

She is my Aunt, she said, her breath husky in her voice. She is Abijah's sister. He would want me to take care of her because when he rode off that day he told us to take care of one another. He said

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that and I said I would do it, Miss Christopher! Yes, I did, and I have to. And you yourself told me that it was my Duty. Yes, you were right! Before God it was my duty you said.

Yes, child! Oh Lord save us all!

I had not ever heard her so moved, to speak so warmly, with so much aching in her throat: my cold, proud Aunt Sarah.

Raining raining cold stormy weather! rang that gay, uncracked voice.

Please! pleaded Cathie. Go away! Let us alone! Let us alone! Please! Oh, I'm sorry! I'm impudent! But go away! Please!

Child! Yes! Yes, child!

And she swept down the stairways and whispered past me in her tall skirts, her face like wood but her eyes wild and wandering with a sorrow that shamed her cold pride.

Oh, Aunt! Aunt, be still!

Bige?

No. No, Aunt! It's Cathie!

General Jamieson?

Hush, Aunt!

Get out of the way for Old Dan Tucker! He's too late to get his supper! Light a candle, love! Oh raise the shade, dearie, the days—so short—so short! It's dusk and suppertime and I haven't shelled one of them peas. Bige?

Aunt, please! Hush! Hush! Don't let them hear you!

Nellie? Is that Nellie? Why, bless my soul! Me eyes must be failin' me! It's Tom's mother—it's Ella Christopher!

And I stood wrapped round in fear while the ghost of my long dead and unremembered mother came and took her turn with the others and stood at the bed of the dying Rebecca.

Is that you, Bige? Who's—? Who's—? Ah, it's Peggy! Joe's and Sarah's Peggy!

I would not have wanted to have seen Aunt Sarah's face then as she would now fix it, turning it to the wall and burying her eyes in the dumb, unreflecting wood. But now Rebecca had abated in her outcries and seemed to subside muffled in happy chuckles and bright anticipation. Her long, good life had been, in those last days, rib-boned out before us all to touch and feel and see, like a bolt of good, staunch drygoods, printed through with cheap, sweet flowers and fresh from the buggy of some honest drummer.

It began to rain that afternoon and the wind rose and lashed the

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house with white sheets of it, blowing hard from the river, and struggling its crystal against the windowpanes and streaming down the house and bounding on the road. Since Rebecca had called out my mother's name I had grown numb with thoughts. By my window now, harking to wind and rain, I could still hear nothing but the echo of that voice that had cried out my mother's name and I thought to myself: Yes, she was there. She came and stood before her bed, right there by the hair trunk in the little room with the cold breath. My mother came and stood there and she saw her. I've got to know. I've got to know.

And nothing could have kept me from that threshold now. I fled down the hall and darted past Cathie and confronted the old one, the wild face with the spectacles now fallen and dangling from her lip, life gone and sweet laughter gone and the song and lust stilled at last.

Is my mother beautiful? I cried out.

But she was dead and Cathie said nothing because she had done all that God and Aunt Sarah had asked of her and even when these were done she had done more: had closed the secret eyes and, because they had no pennies, either of them, she had cut two neat horn buttons from her ragged child's coat and set them on either lid.

• • •

The wind had stopped blowing but it seemed that it had not really subsided but had passed us by and was howling now against other windows somewhere behind the world. The morning of the old woman's funeral Uncle Joe relinquished his chair in the parlor like a meek child, and a little fearfully, for it was not wholly clear to him who had died. In blindness and in age I think he had come to think of death with a kind of generalness; a failing in the tissue of all humankind.

Ah, don't she look natural! someone said, everyone said, and it became the day's chief falsehood for, in fact, the substance of Rebecca Hornbrook lay heaped glum and dull as a wad of tallow there in the coarse pine box.

The Negro women were set to clean the parlor and found little enough to dust for Rebecca had gone that way with her feather duster not ten days before and whatever she did she always had tried to make it her best. And old Cynthie Cox and Miss Dulcie

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Curtis and her brother Doctor Willie came in their spidery black buggy and brought stone jars of potato salad and fried chicken wrapped in pages from Godey's and, for what purpose none of us could imagine, a demijohn of turpentine. Willie was tipsy (he was never in his life any more drunk than he was sober) and he came across the parlor behind the two women with whom he lived, swaying faintly and yet decorously, and with elegance bore the demijohn of turpentine like a temple lamp in his tapering, waxlike fingers, and hiccupped softly.

And it rained. It seemed the penultimate downpour and I suspected before long that black Toot would go to the window and watch anxiously for her old friend Noah to come riding through the submerged mountains. Cathie kept apart from us all: dressed in her good black dress and with her moon face wan and silvery under her dark cloak of hair. And I could not face her somehow because I think I knew how much of me I would find mirrored there: how much of the grief and loss of faces too darkened by memory to be seen. And Pastor Blake came and Elmer Thornton, the undertaker, fussed and picked around his handiwork like an Italian music master primping his star pupil for her first recital. I dreaded him with a loathing that choked me. He seemed Death's own advocate and he would stand and let his eye rove round the room and rub his dry, chalky palms one against the other and survey each of us in his turn, the measuring eye and the practiced, swift estimate of the size of the box we would need and the price we would be worth when the shovel tamped the neat mound at last. And I wondered to myself that day with the strange and candid innocence of childhood who would bury Elmer Thornton when he came at last to the black hour.

Curiously the house seemed a-bustle with an almost Christmas energy—Death seemed to generate its own industry and liveliness all around it—and everyone was hungry—everyone but Cathie, everyone but me—and neighbors had brought enough to feed a church picnic and after a while we grew hungry, too. It was a mortal hunger as if Death had made us all love life so fiercely that day that we could never be filled, could never taste Life's substances strong enough upon our living tongues.

Bless me! cried Dulcie Curtis in that wild, happy voice that nothing, not funerals at least, ever softened. There's the Captain's grandson—Tom.

And she came over and threw her stiff, scratchy taffeta arms around

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me and made me kiss her cheek which troubled me because her face was so powdered it made me sneeze: sweet-fragrant with a vanilla scent like a sugar-dusted cake and there was a wart on her chin with five great bristles like a small and useless brush and I was careful not to let that touch my face, nor her hands which smelled eternally of lemons. At the moment when Pastor Blake had opened his Scripture and spoken the appropriate words, Doctor Willie, swaying and smiling, his eyes far away in some occult speculation over Life and Death, bumped incautiously against the sharp edge of Rebecca's coffin and shattered a small medicine bottle of bourbon whiskey in his pocket and, with one boot unmoving in the spreading, incriminating puddle of Sin on my Aunt Sarah's parlor rug, he had stared down at it and then at us and remarked urbanely and civilly (although no one had said a word): It's a lie!

And when it was over and the lid, charitably, closed on the poor clay mask we followed the black coach and the broken-winded mare up the soggy, torrent-wild road to the place on the hill, beyond Dulcie's house, where the stones were and the names and the carved angels against the sky. I could not see Cathie when the first spade flung the cold winter clods drumming on the box lid and if she was crying I would not have known it, with the rain on all of our faces. Aunt Sarah's face was without remorse or sorrow or any emotion except for her eyes, which as always betrayed her, and they were full of the tenderness against which, I believe, she had struggled all her life. Uncle Joe stood with his blind eyes reaching to the rain, his head cocked and a half-smile on his lips, listening, as he often seemed to be, for some voice close by. Suse and Toot and old Coy stood bedraggled and sodden before the ritual, showing unashamedly that old primal awe which each of the rest of us felt and yet masked with feelings wholly different. And suddenly it was done and earth had claimed her and was leveled again and just as abruptly, as if at a signal, the rain stopped and the sky broke open into blue patches and small gusts of breeze; the children of yesterday's long, cold wind gamboled among us. And everybody began trudging down the sloshy ruts for home. Everybody, that is, but Cathie and I who, unaccountably, had been forgotten in the aftermath.

The air was nippy and sharp with a keen white tooth of winter still in it but now the whole panoply of sky had scattered and across the keen winter blue of it, swift clouds hurtled out of the horizon like westering boats. Cathie stood a few paces away at the rim of

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the mound of fresh earth but she had turned away and was starting off toward the river far beyond the toy meadow beneath the hill. I walked to her with feet heavy with mud and confusion and stood still, trying to guess her expression behind the bonnet rim. And presently she spoke out.

I just hate her, she said, and I leaned around and saw her face then, pinched and raging.

Who?

Her! Her! she gasped, gesturing woodenly toward the grave and weeping now, sobbing, unabashed and shaking with it. Aunt Rebecca!

You mustn't say that! I said softly, staring at the mound and the cheap country flowers.

I do! I do!

Why? I whispered and my eyes went a-wandering among the stony names and the dates and the sandy angels with their dreadful, beckoning cherub hands.

She was awful! Abijah would have been so *ashamed!*

Why?

The way she carried on! The things she hollered and the songs she sang! Awful awful awful! And the way she—she *looked* in the coffin there! Didn't you see how awful she looked? How—*common*!

Nobody looks good when they're dead.

Some people, she cried, are beautiful! My mother was beautiful when she was dead! Not old and ugly—like a *servant*!

And I had no heart nor word to answer that; I who had called them that.

Go away! she raged at me, and my eyes wandered to the stones again and I saw the name of my mother and father and wondered if they listened in their ancient room beneath the roof of grass.

Go away! she wailed. Just leave us be here for a while! Her and me! Go back to your big house, Thomas Christopher! You and your Aunt Sarah and your Uncle Joe and your slaves! Leave the servants be!

And I was glad to go and wandered down to the house and went up to my room and stayed there till dark fell, listening for her to come back and just at dusk she rapped softly at the kitchen window and Toot let her in and I heard her creep to the little room that was all hers now.

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II

WHEN I was very small the house of Dulcie Curtis was a place I swore to live when I was a man and could come and go as I pleased, without Aunt Sarah's by-your-leave. Once, I had been there, when I was five, and had come away wide-eyed and clammy-handed with wonder, my mind twinkling with the vision of that candy box of a front room in Dulcie's house: a spotless, shuttered chamber within which the light of day sifted so dim that it seemed always late pleasant afternoon there and at night when the lamps were lighted the air grew golden as pollen and caught its breath and shone green and soft like a forest in the sea.

Dulcie and her brother Willie had lived all their days in that house. Willie had gone off when he was seventeen and studied for medicine at the University and remembered the aging Jefferson in those days and had come back to the bottomlands as fine a doctor as we, or anyone else, could ask and settled down with a genteel and resigned smile and commenced to drink peach brandy. He had never stopped that, nor his medicine either, and it was the custom in the bottomlands when a woman was quick with child and her burden awoke from its dream at last and began to stir, that they would come fetch Willie Curtis and hold him prisoner a week before the confinement so that his lean, cunning fingers would be fit for the task. There was about him—however thick-tongued with drink he might be—an unvarying and unfailing gentility of a breed antique and extinct in these brusque times. In the summer he wore a white linen suit and a white shirt and black string tie and under his white mustache he thoughtfully sucked on a clove from Dulcie's spice cabinet so as not to offend the bigoted and faint of heart. In the winter he wore a gray alpaca suit and a beaver hat and carried peppermints in

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his pockets for small sick children. Aunt Sarah could not abide his habits but his manners flattered her and since he was the only doctor between Christopher's Landing and Elizabethtown he had to do. As for myself I adored him and when he would lower the quilt to thump my poor chest, rasping with my every breath like a broken harmonium, he would tell me to listen while he beat the rhythm slow and dark as he had heard the drums of the First Virginia Infantry on the sad day when he was my age and General Washington had been laid in his vaulted tomb and even the black crows wheeling and scrawing in the sky had seemed to grieve. I think in his squashy black bag he only carried three bottles of pills: three, mind you, for a world of ills, for a universe sick and gasping and on its knees, close to its end. There was the blue pill for physic, the yellow pill for fever, and brown one, I suppose, to take away the sour, dusky taste of the first two. Three pills for all of life's ills and in the sagging, baggy pocket of his alpaca coat the bottle which was the cure for his own; the heart's death and some odd, broken dream that we all, like as not, would have laughed to hear. And though Aunt Sarah would not stand in the room when he came to thump my breast or grieve hopelessly over Uncle Joe's imagined cholera; though she would recoil at the breath of him that was always sweet and volatile like a cellar of peaches in hot August, so thick sometimes that you could almost hear the singing of a golden wasp beneath his shirt, it was his sister Dulcie that she would not countenance.

Dulcie had married a man named Charley Lindsay, fifty years before, and it was said of her that she married him because he had not a hair on his chest and had the sweetest voice in ten counties of Virginia. Charley was as loud as a rouster, as fat as a boar, and as timid as hare. There was no one in the valley who had not had to listen to his accounts of epic and bloody fist fights in the old river days and yet there was not a man living in our county to whom he had ever raised his voice in anger, much less his fist. They were without issue, he and Dulcie, and when they had been married ten years Charley suddenly commenced taking the mare off every Friday evening and not returning till long past nine. Dulcie followed him on foot one night, a long four-mile journey down that dusk-yellow river road, and watched behind a small grove of plum trees while Charley entered the house of a woman named Cynthie Cox. After a few moments, Dulcie stole to the window of the parlor and peering inside saw her husband and Cynthie Cox playing euchre on a drop-leaf table. She

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said nothing and after a few weeks followed him again and peered in the same window and saw the same quiet spectacle. And it had gone on that way for thirty years, rain or shine. Dulcie never let on she knew, not even when he had forgotten one night and called her Cynthie in the starshine of their pillow. And when, at last, Charley Lindsay died in an apoplectic seizure on the courthouse steps at Elizabethtown when the final result of the election of Tyler was nailed to the oak tree, Dulcie had taken the buggy down river to the house of Cynthie Cox and introduced herself and they had sat there and cried for a while and had tea and cried some more and a week later Cynthie came to live at Dulcie's house. To Aunt Sarah and, for that matter, to most of the decent women in the bottoms this seemed the blackest scandal since Eden—mistress and widow under the same roof. Yet each had loved him, each had wondered at his strangeness, each knew the ultimate joke that Providence had played them and it seemed, I think, that something pleased them in the way it had come out in the end. I doubt if his name was ever mentioned between them, except perhaps when one of them would find some poor, pathetic memento of him in the parlor or bedroom and ask whether it should be thrown out or not. In the end, I suppose, all of him was thrown out, memory and shoes and beaver hat, until at last there survived between these two women only a sweet, mute kinship of understanding and a secret laughter at Life which had not let either of them know the love of man. Spinsters they were, in fact. Spinsters to see, certainly: sweet and spotless in black taffeta dickies and with bonnets perpetually on their heads: old bonnets like limp marigolds whose petals cupped round their dusty white faces. It seems to me that there was always something of filigreed gold and polished jet about their throats, always a scent of cedar about their clothes with a breath of tansy from their pantry still clinging to them. Cynthie was small-voiced and genteel and Dulcie was delicate as a needle but blunt and outspoken as a man.

A cat, she had been heard to remark to Uncle Joe in her spring vegetable garden one morning, will walk a mile to piss on parsley!

And Uncle Joe would tell this to make Aunt Sarah sniff and purse her face and go off angry into the kitchen and leave him be. For she could not countenance them and the house of Dulcie was a place she would not let me go when I was small. Though the spring I turned thirteen I went where I pleased and Cathie came, too, for in those years since the death of Rebecca some new and somehow frightened

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kinship had grown between us. She was now eleven and tough as a boy and in the summers she would reach August as brown as I was and her legs would be scratched and torn by the same wild-berry thorns that laced my own and we would race through the fields and meadow by day and sometimes by the light of moon, like the wild children of the fox. Sometimes, ravening with thirst in the shimmer glass of a blinding August afternoon, we would come up the hill, through the cemetery, to the house of Dulcie. And she would fix us cold drinks with some sort of fruit syrup she had made and kept in a cool stone jar beneath the pump and we would move cautiously like quivering horses through the delicate half-light of her little parlor, our flanks twitching with carefulness not to knock against the spidery legs of a tiny table, or the bellied glass of her souvenir cabinet, or the bell-jar with the tiny boat. And when we had had our poundcake and our cold drink in the parlor of Dulcie and heard Cynthie play Mister Foster's tunes on the harmonium we would race out again onto the hill, bound again for home or to the woods again to see if the redbird whose nest we had found that morning had come back again to its eggs. What bound us together in those years was a thing so totally unlike the first year that the death of Rebecca seemed a gateway between those two worlds of darkness and light. In that time Abijah had written two letters from Kansas and she carried them with her always in the pocket of her dress and sometimes when her temper was generous she would let me hold them and read them again.

The first letter spoke of the death of Rebecca. The second told us that he had joined the cavalry of a gentleman named Morgan in Kentucky and that he would come back by and by. And it was clear, although he did not mention it again, that when he came he would be a King and riding proud, in scarlet, and with silver pistols in his belt. Because that had always been her dream and in those years, strangely and magically, it had come to be my own and she had shared it with me like the warmth of a home hearth. I could hardly remember the bitterness of that first winter now and, often, in my dreams I would see the vision of him: high and lofty on a frothing mare, a man higher than the sycamore by the north fence, a giant printed on the sky. And yet sometimes, although we were inseparable, I would feel a sudden, choking rise of hatred and violence against her that made those first resentments seem like the paleness of a star beside the moon. We were together from breakfast till

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Aunt Sarah snuffed out every lamp and yet there were times when we would find one another caught up in a sudden trivial incident and a moment later would be standing, toe to toe, lashing at each other's face with fingers or stones or whatever happened to be at hand. Things came too easy for her; I could not forgive her that. She rode like a highwayman—she could bring down a bird with a stone no bigger than her thumbnail—she could swim deeper and more swiftly than I. And once when we stole Willie Curtis's johnboat and went clean out to mid-channel and stood in the very path of the morning packet to Sunfish as it came churning toward us, she had dived when it swept past and disappeared beneath it and I gasped and prayed and was sure she would come up broken and bleeding in the wake of its paddle wheel but she had done the incredible feat: she had gone under it and up the other side and bobbed now in the churning spindrift of the blowing river wind, her hair streaming in her mocking eyes and her red mouth taunting me till I bit the blood out of my own tongue in envy and outrage.

She never mentioned her Aunt Rebecca once in all those years and one time when our day's fortunes had taken us by chance through the graven stones on the hill by Dulcie's house I had caught her hand and held her and stared down for a moment at the stone above that mound that the grass and stars-of-Bethlehem had covered now: the name already worn by the ceaseless fingers of the rain: "Rebecca Hornbrook—Born 1790—Died 1855—Night winds, night winds blowing leaves in heaps—Fall gently over the grave where Rebecca sleeps." And she had suddenly clenched her fingers and bent my thumb back till I squealed shamefully and tore it free, and I saw the hate and dread in her eyes before she sprang off and raced me to the road. We never tarried there again—in that village of the sleepers—and I never hit her that day for bending my thumb because it was a justice.

I'm going to cut my hair off! she said to me one day when we were stripping to swim in the river.

You'd never!

I would! she cried and her voice echoed in the grove of willows and a bird climbed, startled, and cried across the sky. Because that's how your Aunt Sarah knows when we've been swimming! And she shed her camisole and the rest of the incongruous female frippery that Aunt Sarah bedecked her in (she had grown unaccountably fond of her in those last two years) and stood glaring out at the river,

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hugging her brown arms round her chest, the sunlight twinkling like tiny fires on the fine down of her thighs.

Then I can dive all I please! she said. And she'll never know.

But even the thought of this forbidding seemed to enrage her and, wet hair or no, she suddenly arched and plunged neatly into the deep amber pool in the river shoals below. I watched her far beneath it, far down in the very depths of it where the sunfish broke and scattered like chips of pearl before her naked slimness and I felt my temples pound with anger. She was a better diver than I and could stay down for a length of time that brought me to the surface with aching ears and a nose full of green water. I stood and watched her surface and claw her dark hair back and mock me again with her eyes.

He taught me to swim, she shouted.

Who? I cried, and dove off the bluff and struck the water like a falling chair and sank tumbling heel over ears and came up choking.

Abijah taught me! she laughed. When I was only three he threw me off the *Nellie Queen* and told me I'd have to swim or drown. And I swam!

I taught myself, I said, and it was the glummest, dullest fact in the world.

Damme! she swore. I'm going to cut all my hair off! That's just what I'm going to do.

Stop swearing, I said, or I'll tell Aunt Sarah!

I don't care, she said. Abijah used to swear something wonderful!

That's no matter, I said. You heard Jamey Toomey, the old scissor-sharpener, say "damme" that day in the back yard and you just say it to be smart.

I used that word long before! she cried. Damme! Abijah used to say that all the time!

That's a lie! You just say it to be smart because you heard him say it and you know Aunt Sarah won't let Jamey sharpen our knives any more.

She dove again, heedless, and was gone, and I ducked under and saw her whiteness loping like a far, ghostly porpoise in the murky shoals and then I swallowed water and came up gasping. She was nowhere in sight and I knew that she was teasing again, trying to scare me, trying to make me think a big snapping turtle had caught her foot, and I could see bubbles rising, mocking bubbles that broke and each held a small laughter. In the end I always grew frightened

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at the trick and just at the moment when I would imagine that at last she had really gone down in trouble I would hear her laughter behind me and there was never time for me to turn before she thrust me under and turned me over and then scrambled up on the bank before I could get my hands on her.

Sometimes in the wild sweetness of those days we would go solemnly to the beached boat of Abijah on the sandy bar where he had left it and there was no mocking or struggle in us then: we went fingers-linked and dumb with shared pride, like pilgrims, to some barbaric ivory temple in the wilderness.

She *is* very beautiful, she would say after a spell of looking. Isn't she! The *Nellie Queen*!

She sure is. Prettier than the *Zachary Taylor*!

Pooh! *That* old shantyboat!

And once while we had stood there among the rocks of the sandbar I had known one small moment of glory: I had spied a copperhead not a hand's length from her bare toes and I had killed it. Then she kissed my cheeks like a general and promised that when Abijah came he would make me first mate of the *Nellie Queen*.

A thousand nights in her pantry had made us canny of Toot's teasing. She did not find us such easy game in these wiser years. One night when Cathie had taken an apple from the box and Toot saw her she told her that it was the snaky apple she had chosen.

Sho! said Toot. And de way you just grab and pick it out the fust time shows that you got the makin's of mischief within you already!

Shoot!

Gwan! Eat a bite, Li'l Miss Evie! And den give some to poh Adam sittin' yonder! And then just see the trouble come switchin' round you like de snake of damnation!

Cathie glared at the apple a moment and then bit it so angrily that the crackle spoke out sharp in the room and the juice of it spurted round her nostrils.

There! she cried when she had chewed it and gulped it down. I ate a bite! Here, Tom!

I took it and ate a bite, smaller than hers, to show that I was not afraid, and watched her whirl on Toot.

See there! she cried. Nothing happened. I'm the same! So's Tom!

You think you the same! sniffed Toot. But just wait till temptation comes through de grass!

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Pshaw!

Sho! You'll see! Hit'll come a-wrigglin' directly.

But we never believed it and we ate the White Kirklands and the Canada Reds from Aunt Sarah's cellar as much as we pleased and sin never came a-wriggling at all. Not right away, at least.

Not that there was no Sin already abroad in that time; not that there was not trouble enough astir like thunder coiled in the thick air of that summer. It was the season of the ants and no one remembered a summer when they had been so bothersome. Their legions trickled into every corner of the house. They found their way somehow into the most close-capped honey pot; they tracked in thin, glittering ranks through the dust in the yard: ants moving in nervous, closed phalanx up and down the smooth boles of the fruit trees and the windfallen fruit was pitted with their small ravaging. And Toot knew the wherefore of this strangeness, too.

Sho! she exclaimed one morning, dashing them from the window sill with an angry hand. De ants knows!

Knows what? said Cathie.

Knows de evil of de times! cried Toot. When de ants goes to marchin'—mens will be marchin' soon!

Pshaw!

Hit's a fack! It's wrote plain in de Book!

It was a dark prophecy and her flesh seemed quivering with it and neither of us mocked her for that; it seemed more than just a teasing. And there were other portents. Aunt Sarah sometimes tore the *Wheeling Argus* to bits in anger at some news of the Dred Scott business. At Carly Juniper's General Store men who had once muttered, shouted at one another now, and fists were raised and sometimes on the courthouse steps at Elizabethtown derringers were cocked in warning and pepperboxes barked when all patience was gone. In the fall of that year a band of men from Kansas came to our very dominion and seized the arsenal at Harper's Ferry and were hanged for their trouble.

And though she never talked of it, I think Cathie knew that somewhere in the broil of it all Abijah stood strong and ready and that in the resolution of it he would find his birthright and come back at last. Though it had been a year since his last letter. And that troubled her, I think, and she seemed irritable that summer. But that, I guess, was mostly because she was growing so fast. She was sprouted up clean to the tip of my nose now and lean and hard as a willow wand

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and in that strange summer a kind of dreamy frenzy sometimes seemed to seize her and I would find her often staring moodily off into the river wind or alone in the top of a tree in Uncle Joe's orchard with a half-eaten pear in her hand, and when I spoke to her she would look at me dumbly and then look at the fruit as if she wondered how it had come to be there and wonder whose teeth had spooned out its tart sweet flesh in that bitten place. Sometimes she would stop speaking in the middle of a sentence and it would almost seem that she were listening to remote voices.

What's wrong, Cathie?

Nothing! Nothing! Let me alone!

You're sure different these days! You must be sick with growing pains or something!

Sometimes she would fight me for a word like that, come rushing at me with her face livid and drawn with unspeakable spite and we would tumble to the sward of buttercups in a tangle of mad limbs, our fingers striving for each other's hair and the breath of us mingling in numb, furious strife. Other times she would seem not to have heard me at all and move off and sit alone somewhere or go and devil Suse or Toot in the pantry or sew with Aunt Sarah in the north room. And then in that September a thing came to pass that seemed to quicken her fever all the more. We had walked all the way to Carly Juniper's store to buy licorice and a spool of green thread for Aunt Sarah and were easing homeward. Just as we rounded the clump of pawpaws by the road at the corner of our fence we both spied the man on the bay stallion cantering toward us. I heard Cathie's quick sob and I think for a moment she thought it was Abijah and we both began to run toward the rider as if we knew that it was us he had come for.

Hi! he cried, reining up when we were abreast of him. Are you Catherine Ellen Hornbrook, madam?

Yes! *I* am! *He*'s not!

Well now, I wouldn't reckon that feller yonder would have a name like Catherine Ellen!

What do you want? Are you a friend of Abijah's?

Hold on now, madam! Don't get wild! My name is Frank Seton and I'm lieutenant in Morgan's Kentucky Rifles!

Is Abijah all right!

Fine, fit, and full of fight!

Where is he?

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Hit don't matter where. You couldn't go to him now if you was a mind to, and he'll not be back home for a spell. When I told him I was ridin' up the river to Wheeling to see a lady he asked me to stop—.

Have you got a letter from him?

That'll wait. Let me finish. Lord, you're *his* all right—there's the same brimstone smell when you speak a while! He's fine, as I've already said, and he sends you his blessings and his love and says he prays to God for you ever' night and asks you to do him the same favor. God knows he'll need them prayers and so will we all.

Why?

Ain't you heared, daughter? Don't newspapers git back this far in the country? Ain't there enough steamboat talk to keep you farmers posted? There's a war comin'!

War! she whispered and the word blew soft like a wind through her. Yes, a war!

Sho, he said. A real war! And soon, I allow! Soon!

He was dressed for a war, I thought, and stared in dumbstruck love at his knee-high boots shiny and wrinkled as prunes and his fine gray wool suit and the pistol in his belt as long as from my elbow to my little-finger tip.

Sho, he said again, staring off up river. A right smart of a war! But we're feeling up to it!

And Abijah will lead them! she cried suddenly, bringing her palms together with a soft clap, and threw her head back with that light in her face.

Well now! cried the man in gray. I don't know about that. There's some other ideas about who's to lead! But he'll be in the thick! Don't worry 'bout Bige Hornbrook.

He said to give you this, said Frank Seton and reached in his shirt under the gold buttons of his gray jacket and fetched out a piece of midday summer sun. He held it down to her, swinging on a gold chain as gossamer-thin as spider's silk. Cathie took it, breathless, and cupped it in her palms, the locket with the feathers scratched on it and the looped chain coiled like a golden hair.

It's Mama's locket! she breathed. He carried it with him everywhere!

Well, he bade me give it to you and tell you to keep holt of it till he gets back!

When?

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The man in gray laughed: a sound like the soft breaking of a rifle and looked down at us both, smiled down at us.

Sho, he said. I know the answer to that like I know the day of Armageddon.

He grinned and fetched out a chew of plug and bit off a corner and jawed it a minute and then looked at us again with his strange, quiet, violent face.

Morgan says it'll be over and done by the spring of 'Sixty-one, he said with a soft chuckle. But I reckon the Lord will measure the time of it—not Morgan nor me nor even yore Daddy, Catherine Ellen, madam!

War! she breathed again as if the word ran like a soothing thing upon her tongue.

Sho! said the gray man and caught up his reins again. But it's good-by now. There's a lady in Wheelin'—.

Good-by! she said and bit her lip, scowling, as if she knew there were something she must tell him: something about a King. But she kept her peace and he smiled again and tipped his hat and bowed a little in the saddle and then his black heel flashed in the stallion's flank and the hooves sprang up in a thunder and they were gone in dust and a wild flourish up the river road again. Cathie stole off by herself to the shade of the pawpaws with her back to me. I knew she was prying open the tiny gold shell of the locket to stare inside and when I crept up behind her to look too, she clapped it shut in her hands and whirled on me.

I just detest a sneak and a spy! she cried, stamping her foot in the dust.

Why can't I see?

Because it's a special locket! That's why! It's my mother's picture and it was hand-painted by a genuine Spanish artist and it's just for me and Abijah to look at!

It was too near suppertime for us to have a fight so I walked off indifferently, kicking my bare toe in the dust and watching a toad thumping off ahead of me a dozen yards or so.

I'll bet she's ugly, I said. Just like a hop-toad!

And she chased me to the house for that and I ran ahead of her through the long meadow laughing and yelling it over and over all the way indoors and up the stars and latched the door to my room and she hammered on the old wood until Aunt Sarah came and yelled at her to stop.

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Tom, unlatch that door this minute!

Yes'm.

Toot said there was a rider on the road!

I said nothing and Cathie shook her head with wondrous bewilderment and looked Aunt Sarah square in the eye.

I declare! Cathie sighed. That Toot is the blackest liar in all creation.

Indeed! Then what she said ain't so?

Why, no! laughed Cathie in wide-eyed surprise and kept the locket in the hands she had laced behind her.

I could have sworn I heard hooves! Well, no matter. You know what I've told you children about talkin' to strangers on the road.

Yes'm, we said together.

Then remember it! There's gypsies abroad in the land and they *steal children!* Remember that! They steal children and sell them for slaves in Egypt! Would you like that?

No'm, we lied, for we should have loved that.

All right. Now go wash for supper. The both of you. And get clean all the way to the elbows. And, Tom, put on your shoes too!

And we went to the pump and washed and I thought that I would die if she didn't show me the locket soon. It had seemed to me in those months that Abijah was as much my own dream as hers and it was wicked of her to keep this glory from me.

The thick, bunched heat of the day broke at twilight in a wild river storm and we sat after supper in the kitchen listening to the drip of the rain and the far-off rumble of the retreating thunder.

You tol' Miz Christopher a lie, you scallawags!

We never did! cried Cathie.

Sho you did! said Toot. I seen dat man on de horse plain as you see me hyer!

You're always seeing things! said Cathie scornfully.

Toot fell silent then, muttering from time to time like the way-off thunder, and her old face crinkled in worry as if misdoubting that a body could believe their eyes at all in that strange time, when ants marched like the tragic legions of the world's benighted men and when summer thunder upon the far-away ridges sounded more and more like the gathering fury of an outraged god.

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It was an hour after the rain stopped that the clouds were gone

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and a thin moon lay curled in my window and when the owl began to blow its soft grieving flute in the orchard I heard her tap on my door. The house was long abed and I knew it could be none but her and yet I cried out the whispered challenge as if I feared that it might not be a mortal at all.

It's me!

And she opened the door, knowing how to bear down and swing it with a little swift push so that the brass hinge would not speak. She was standing there in her long nightdress like a pleasant ghost with her dark hair in pigtails down either shoulder, and it was then I saw the moonshine glint on the gold in her hand.

You can look, she whispered when she had come to my bedside, and I tore out of the quilt and took it gently from her fingers.

Careful you don't break the chain, she whispered. Here, let me open it! It's very hard to do!

And she took it and her hair fell over her hands as she bent and plucked the tiny lid loose with her fingernail and then held it out in the patch of moon for me to see.

That's her, she said softly. Nellie. Abijah's beautiful Nellie.

I took it and saw it in my own hand and felt a little of the shared love of it flow into my fingers: the magic of that tiny, oval face with the frame of dark, wooden hair and the sad smiling mouth.

Isn't she beautiful? Like a queen! That's why Abijah called his boat after her. The *Nellie Queen*. You can see why—can't you?

Yes, I said with a strange grief in my throat. She is surely a belle!

She crawled up on the quilt and tucked her feet under her nightdress and sighed happily, holding her hand out to take the locket back. But I could not let it go just yet: there was a magic in it that warmed something cold in me.

Don't keep it too long, she said gently.

All right, I said. Here.

And I gave it back and suddenly I knew that I had to lie to her and as soon as the lie rose to my lips it magically became a truth.

I told you once that I couldn't remember my mother, I said.

Yes.

Well, that ain't so, I said. I was just making that up. I mind her very well.

Yes, but you said—.

I know. The reason I said that was because I knew your mother was dead and I didn't want to make you feel bad. I didn't want to

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go bragging on my own mother when you couldn't even remember yours.

But I do! I do!

Sure, I said. I never knew that then! Now I know and it's all right to tell you! My mother's only been dead about five years, you see!

I've been here nearly that long! she said frowning. And you said—.

Well maybe it was six years, I said, wallowing desperately through these thick, deep waters. A body loses track of time.

Tom, she said softly. You seem to forget sometimes that we're friends—*close* friends! You don't have to lie to me!

Stop saying I'm a liar! I whispered fiercely, bunching up my fist to hit her. My mother was beautiful! I remember! I remember!

Tom! Tom, don't start fighting now! Please! Oh, Tom, I'm so happy tonight! The news from Abijah and everything.

I pouted, glum and wounded, and would not look at her.

And there's going to be a War! she whispered, in a wondrous trance of happiness. A War, Tom! And Abijah will win—he'll be the one to lead them and then he'll be King.

And for that matter, I said, I happen to remember my father very well, too. He looked just like that man on horseback today!

Tom!

Well, I do!

Tom, why do you make up stories! Our being friends hasn't got anything to do with that! Can't you understand? We're both of us alone—!

And when I thrust out both hands and struck her in the chest she gawped and gasped and fell back on the quilt and did not move and I crawled over and stared down in her face. I had thought that there would be a fight and Aunt Sarah would hear us and come and find her there and it would be her that would get the licking, not me, because it was her that was out of bed and prowling the house. But she lay very still with her eyes closed and with her white teeth bitten deep into her lower lip and there was a gold brimming of tears in her lashes.

What's wrong? I whispered, shaking her shoulder. Did I hurt you?

She nodded, a fast quick motion of her head and I saw her clenched hands and the tears shook loose from her lashes and trickled down her cheeks. And I think they were not so much tears of pain as they were of shame that she had not fought me.

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I'm sorry, I said, and hated myself for the weakness of that.

She lay a while longer and then sat up suddenly and dug at her eyes with the heels of her hands and sniffled haughtily.

I think I hurt my chest swimming yesterday forenoon, she said, and snuffled, not looking at me. It hurts lately.

Your chest hurts?

She nodded, still with her eyes in the moon and the tree that had caught it and whose branches now relinquished it like opening, reluctant fingers which could hold it back no more.

I guess that's a good thing for you to know, she said with an angry snuffle. When we fight.

What?

About my chest, she said a little wistfully. If you want to hurt me now—you know how, Tom Christopher! Just hit me in the chest!

I won't, I said after a while and wished she would let me look at Abijah's locket a little while more.

Why not? she said. It's fair. When you fight someone you can hit them anywhere! That's fair! I'm not asking any special favors!

I made no reply because I knew that fighting with her in those last few weeks had not been any good: there was something wrong with her and maybe something wrong with me as well. Fighting her was no fun any more because there was a softness gathering silently beneath her skin in those months and when you hit her it was soft, it did not feel right. And after a while there in the moonlight I didn't even want to fight her any more. Perhaps because of this strangeness or perhaps because she let me hold the locket again to stare silently at that haunting tiny face upon the oval of ivory, dusted with the antiquity of that summer moonlight and I kept it there in my hand and she did not quarrel with me to give it back until I was ready. And when the owl began faintly chuckling again in the orchard I think it frightened us both and she took it back and kissed my cheek and stole softly into the darkness again.

• • •

And there was this strangeness common to her and to myself and to the season: a hush before the raging. Once I found her, after a whole day's search, in my old haunts, in the crown of the roof, atop the world: squatting bony-kneed and desolate on the naked, harsh rafters that had been laid there in my Grandfather's time. All I could see in that whistling, empty darkness was the shape of her

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face: watched it turn slowly from the chink of steaming daylight to shape itself to full roundness, the black eyes slowly blinking at my head and shoulders in the open square above the ladder.

What do you want?

Nothin'.

She said nothing and the white of her face slid to half moon and then to none and I knew her eye was back at the peephole through which only the pure of heart might spy upon the universe. She would have none of me.

Go away, she whispered, dispassionately, after a spell.

What's wrong, Cathie?

She was still, and my eyes, accustomed now to the shapes of things in that darkness, saw how she held the old bird's nest cupped in her hands.

Well, she said after a while. There is something wrong, Thomas, since you ask. And I just might as well tell you.

What? I whispered, and thought about the bird's nest and of how, if I were a bird, I would come back betimes to visit the round, gentle place of my birth.

It's just that you've all turned against me, she said with a dark broken sob, and I knew that she would have dropped the bird's nest now so that she could clench her fists for strength against sobs, against showing herself to me at all.

That's not so.

It is, too! It is! You've always been against me! You and your Aunt Sarah and even your Uncle Joe. The only ones that were ever nice to me in my whole livelong life were my Aunt Rebecca and she's gone to glory—!

Cathie, I—.

—and maybe Miss Dulcie and Miss Cynthie and Doctor Willie! They're nice to me and when you say something to them they don't turn up their noses at your every little thing! I declare, Tom, sometimes I wish it was me instead of Aunt Rebecca up there under the grass!

Cathie, don't say that! The Lord might hear!

Let Him! she cried. If God is listening right now I'm not ashamed to have Him hear me say sometimes I just naturally wish I was *dead*!

I think I squinted some; faint before the thunder sure to come: the smiting of us both to dust, gray, faint child-dust that would swirl

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and blow among the timbers of that high place in lean-fanged winter nights, among those rafters which might, for all I knew, comprise the floor of vengeful heaven itself: dust to sift among the old loved twigs of the birds' unremembered nursery.

I clambered up and walked toe-to-heel along a timber to where she was.

Let me look, I said. I ain't looked for months!

And she sighed and moved away and left a warm shape of girl-smell in the air where she had brooded so long and I put my eye to the chink of wind-blown light in the broken slates.

The whole world, I whispered. My, it sure is a grand view!

Yes, she said.

That one word told me she had revived a little from her funk and I fanned the flame hopefully.

Look away off yonder there! I cried. You can see Coy off in the south meadow cutting brush-filth!

That's not all, she said softly. There's a way to hold your eye to that hole so's you can see—. No, I won't tell you. I'll make you find it!

What? Where?

Some days you can't see it—when there's a misty rain—or when there's fog you can't see it at all! Today you can though. Most always when there's a clear wind you can!

Yes!

Abijah's boat!

Yes!

The *Nellie Queen*!

Yes! Yes! I cried.

Beautiful! Beautiful! That's why I come up here mostly! It just—it just restoreth *my soul!*

I know! Like it says in the Book!

She rose and tiptoed away proud and mean and happy again; walked straight with her narrow, naked feet unerring and smooth along the rafter to the square that led to the ladder.

And I followed her, dumb and thick-tongued with beholden and graceless longing: there was such a power in her to make or ruin me after all. Since it was past five it was all right for us to take the roan and we climbed her firm rump and rode bareback into the south wind, the mare's hooves beating a muffled, proud drum in the dust of the river road. I rode to forward and she clung behind, her

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hard arms round me and her breath gasping in my ear, all the way to the place.

Sometime! she cried boldly, springing down to the stones, her face flushed and shameless with the pleasure of the wide-legged riding. Sometime let's fetch a cord of wood from home and fill the boilers and get up just enough head of steam to blow the whistle once!

No, I said. Aunt Sarah wouldn't let us have stove wood!

There's wood up in the thickets yonder on the hill!

Yes, but it's still wet from the rain. Some day in September when it's dried out maybe!

Just wait! she cried, striding toward the steamboat. Wait till you hear her whistle, Tom! Abijah used to say it was like a choir of mockingbirds!

Yes, I thought, as I followed her up the stage plank. We'll blow that whistle: that choir of mockingbirds one day shall sing out to the land.

It was not more than four hundred yards down Fish Creek to the mouth of it and the sycamores and willows on either side framed it: the river beyond, coursing heavy and majestic and on any day, in those times, one could stand there and, in a single afternoon, witness the stately passage of a dozen lacy, white packets, like proud swans on their way to Cincinnati or Louisville.

Let me be pilot this time!

No, me!

No. That's not fair. I was leadsman last time.

Then be forward watch!

That's no fun. That's a nigger's job.

Well so's leadsman.

I know but it's dangerous. Let me be pilot this time.

We'll flip. I've got a penny.

If it's Indian up—I get to be pilot! she cried, and her eyes were laughing already: she always won.

And the red coin spun in the sun and splattered on my hand-heel and the dark chief mocked me and she darted gangle-legged up the companionway to the pilot house and tucked her cropped hair into Abijah's old blue cap and stood framed in the giant spokes of that vast mahogany wheel while I waded, ruefully, into the shallows. Yet even in this there was a sweetness that caught my very heart: wading there, waist-deep, in the shoals beyond the *Nellie Queen's* bow, now rank and green-glistening with sumac and creepers, and squinting

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my eyes till my lashes blurred the light of day and conjured it into fog: the swirling mists of a desperate night and I, the black leadsman, held the boat's safety in my fingers' cunning. In my imagined skiff I would make my way cautiously to a distance of twelve feet off her starboard bow and hearing in my dreaming heart the ghostly crank of my fog-shrouded oars, while I dandled my leadline into the treacherous depths. It was a glory but it was a solemn doing: we were never closer to our gods than then. It was not playing: it was ritual and salvation and a praying-time.

Half tw-ain!

And I would hear her shrill voice chant out response, and would wade on, heaving my leadline cautiously.

Quarter less ta-ree! I would sing.

Dreaming then, yes dreaming of nights in the thick blood of summer heat when the channel shallowed to treacherous limits and I had heard the *Zachary Taylor* feel her way like a blind peddler down to Powhatan through mists as thick as the inside of a cotton bale and heard Captain Dohrman's bell clang hotly at those black scallawags in the leadsman's skiff.

Mark ta-ree!

A singing to it: a ghost of a voice as old as river, as old as scritch and rasp of frogs beneath the willows, and the locusts sawing down the last tottering legs of summer under the green dark hill, while certain small lanterns swung like scarlet fireflies.

Quarter ta-ree!

When I opened my eyes wide the magic had become so thick and rich that it was still that night and I would chant the old thing Coy remembered his dead brother singing—Judah, the octoroon who had gone up with the *Chickasaw* when her black diamond boilers blew one night off Memphis in the dead of Christmas Eve: "Captain, Captain, don't you think I'm sly!—Goin' to do my leadin' and keep my leadline dry!"

And when the boat was safely through and heading huffy with triumph, her wheels churning green water like a queen's white lace wake, we'd sit on the rocks on shore a while and brood and listen to the locusts tune themselves up for evening. And yet even in the sweetness and high province of our ritual there in the great boat something was gone. Something had left us that summer: like the birds had fled the old nest in the attic and there was in us both that despair that no singing thing would ever return to that clod of sticks

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and clay and hope. Something had gone out of us and it was a gap between two phases of us each: like the old of the moon. The tried joys seemed failing and the incantations of pagan infancy seemed to have ceased in summoning up the ghosts we loved.

What's wrong with you?

What?

You just sit there and kick that pinching bug with your toe! she said, and presently: Let's go home.

No, I said. Let's go to Dulcie's house.

All right, she said. You're the one who always says we mustn't go to Dulcie's house!

Aunt Sarah don't allow it.

Well then why do you want to go there now?

You're right, I sighed. We better hadn't.

She stood awhile, her eyes smoky with a strangeness.

She'd whip us, she said. Yes, she'd whip us if she ever knew we went there. But that's all she can do. She's not God.

That's sacrilege.

It's not. I didn't make fun of Him! That's what sacrilege means! I just said your Aunt Sarah was not Him. And she's not.

She clambered onto the mare's rump behind me and dug her knuckles into my ribs and rested her pouting, brooding lip on my shoulder.

Anyway, she whispered. Everybody knows God's no old woman. He's a man.

And I held my tongue at that because another word of argument and we would have tangled and gone a-pitching into the ditch and that would have been an end to it all, with only a frothing, white-eyed mare prancing at Aunt Sarah's gate, snorting the tale of our deaths.

She was there, as it was, biting her tongue with outrage for she had found the pile of curls and the already rusted sheep-shearers under the puzzle bush behind the smoke house where, that morning, Cathie had cropped her hair to the shoulders.

March yonder to the house, Missy! And you, too, Mister High and Mighty!

Toot stood in the kitchen door stuffing her apron in her mouth and wheezing with wild mirth at the sight of the hair shorn ragged as a cropped mane.

Sho now! Hain't she a sight fo' God!

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Hush up, Toot! Catherine Ellen! Did you cut your hair?

Yes'm.

Did Tom help you?

No'm. I did it every bit myself.

And mighty proud of your handiwork I can see! And brazen to boot! And lookin' like a hussy from Sodom's alleys!

Sho now—!

Hush, Toot! Git back in the kitchen, you old fool, and hush!

Cathie stood stick-straight and chin-high, still flushed and short-breathed from the ride and dark eyes twinkling, squarely staring into Aunt Sarah's wrathful spectacles.

Go indoors! The both of you! Get yonder into the pantry!

She came behind us and shut the door and latched it against the bald-eyed amusement of the Negro women and fetched a handful of switches from the corner. A blue-bottle fly buzzed and thudded on the window sill, his million eyes wild with yearning for the sun beyond.

Why did you cut your hair off?

Because.

She looked away then and her eyes were scared for a flash and then her mouth squared and she turned back to Aunt Sarah.

Because it's my hair, she said gravely.

Ah, because it's your hair. And you think you may do with yourself as you please?

I hated it, she breathed, the soft flesh beneath her eye curling at the thought. Sometimes I just hate being a girl at all.

But it has been so ordained, said Aunt Sarah. By God who knows His own reasons that you have a woman's full hair.

I know! I know! she cried bitterly. I was born a girl! I'll aways be!

Yes, she said. Female created He and Male. And you would fight against His ordaining.

I can't help it! I still wish it sometimes! Girls can't—girls are just awful!

And you nigh a woman, said Aunt Sarah. In a year you will be a woman, Catherine Ellen. Do you know that?

Yes, she breathed, and the word moaned like a small one-sounded tune.

You had beautiful hair, Catherine Ellen! Look at it!

She held out the tumbling dark curls of it—the smoky, tumbling coils like thick ropes of night.

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I still hate it, she whispered. I'm glad I cut my hair off!

Then I must punish you, said Aunt Sarah. If you kneel here at my knee and pray God to forgive you for what you did—you and Tom may go. If you ask Him to pardon you your mockery of His will—to forgive your willfulness!

No. No, I won't. Because I'm not sorry.

You're old, Catherine Ellen Hornbrook, said Aunt Sarah, lifting the hem of Cathie's skirts to bare her pale, scarred calves for the switch. And big to be whipped. But I'd not be true to the vow I made your Aunt Rebecca to mind you and take care of you if I let this pass.

And the switch whicked and bit and Cathie caught her breath and then as if in a wild try at courage and defiance she opened her mouth and began, in a high, clear voice, to sing.

Hush that while I'm switching you! Hush it I say.

But she would not stop and she found the furious little rhythm of the switch strokes and matched her song to that.

Nellie Bly, Nellie Bly, bring the broom along!
We'll sweep the kitchen clean, my dear, and have a little song!
Be still! Be still, I say!
—Hi Nellie, Ho Nellie! Listen, love, to me!
I'll sing for you, play for you a dulcet melody!

And Aunt Sarah switched till the branch was bare of its bark and broken and dangling in her thwarted hand. She stared at Cathie's quivering back a moment and then whirled her round to face her. Cathie's face was pink and wild with mingled pain and a smile of speechless victory.

Are you sorry now?

No, ma'am.

Then I've done all God could expect, said Aunt Sarah. Sometimes I wonder if I'm strong enough for the task of raising you both up decent and Christian.

Her face seemed suddenly a decade older and her eyes were pale and scared.

It ain't been the easiest thing in the world! she snapped at us both. Neither of you know the nights I've laid awake and sleepless—praying for you—asking His forgiveness for the Sin that has already stained you! Sometimes I wonder if I'm strong enough for it. If I'd had a man to help with it—a man, mind you, and not him yonder

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in the parlor with his tonics and snake oils and pills—a man with eyes, and backbone, mind you! I just wonder if either of you knows what it's like to live all your life in the same house with a father you loved and feared for the first half of your days and a man you pitied and sickened over for the rest. Do you? No, I'll allow you don't as yet. And may you never. Are you listening to me? Does any of this mean anything to you? No. Of course not. I'm a fool. Come yonder, the both of you.

We stepped shy and high-footed into the radius of her strange, camphorous embrace and let her hold us there stiffly and strangely with her chin above our heads and at her gathered collar the gold claw pin with its dusky, faded pearl scratching my ear as she drew me to her. She held us there a while more and then began speaking again, as if she had half forgotten we were there.

I whip you and holler at you, she said harshly, as if the words strained like steam against a cock. And you'll never get too big for that—but I pray for you, too. And if I can raise you both to be Christian and decent I'll not mind how you remember me. I'm queer and old and you can think what you please of me but remember, if you can, that it's none of it been easy. I done every bit as good as I could with you and with everybody else—him included who sits yonder blind and simple as a halfwit on the roads—mocking God by trying to call back the poor ghost of the child of my own womb—the child, Catherine Ellen, that I watched laid into the hill up yonder—under the creepers. Mind that, the both of you! I'm not asking your pity and I'd box your ears if you had the impudence to give it. But I must say this. God only knows I must say it once, at least—that I think only of raising you both—poor, motherless orphans—to be decent and Christian! God help us all! It's a dark time that's coming on us! A dark time! We'll need His Love.

She would not let us go for a moment longer and each of us was too puzzled to move—too stunned at this seeming softness in her, and she sensed that and withdrew suddenly and folded her hands in her apron and surveyed us coldly through her tiny twinkling lenses and then sniffed drily and turned and left us in that quaint, bitter wake of camphor and lavender that always trailed her like a memory: that smell mingling with sassafras and cider and the smell of crumbling summer in the pantry where, upon the dusty pane, the fly still bumbled and strove against his brief summer covenance.

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In the parlor. Nightfall. And now, as I sometimes liked to do, I crept there, across the threshold, to see how close I could come to the blind man before he sensed me there. And it was a thing that seemed a kind of witchcraft that he would turn his head always to me the very moment my foot touched the farthest ragged fringe of the old flowery rug, no matter how soft I came.

Tom? Eh, boy? Ah, come and set a spell!

And I went to the square stool, big and gangly and twelve now but no less eager for the three-cent piece that came less regularly now, for times were lean in the last years of that decade. His fingers finished their quest of my face and fell with a soft thump to the chair arms again.

Where's the gal?

She's in her room, I said. Thinking, I reckon. She thinks a lot these days, Uncle Joe. She's queer, I think.

All women are queer, boy!

Why?

Hah! Ask Adam. It was his rib—not mine. For one thing there's always something *workin'* in 'em!

How do you mean?

Workin', that's what I mean! Bubblin' and *workin'* in 'em—like mother in the cider barrel! A female is always changin' into something or other new, boy, and don't forget it! It's always brewin' in the bone—in the flesh of them! In their blood, I allow! And here's the tricky thing!—you never know how it'll turn out—if it'll come up vinegar or apple cider. The main thing is to let 'em be till they git done with one changin' and hope for the best! And then when they start in to changin' again just go find a rocker and shet your teeth on snuff or a chew and thank God to be out of their path!

He reached out suddenly and patted me heavily on the head.

And you, Tom? Are you well?

Yes, I said. But I'm worried about Cathie.

Ahh.

She can't fight like she used to, I said darkly and with a kind of desperation. She just ain't worth a tinker's dam in a fight any more.

He grunted and tapped his foot nervously and his stomach quarreled shrilly and growled low and suddenly he chuckled and tapped his foot some more.

Her chest hurts easy, I said.

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Ah! Hah!

What are you laughin' at!

I'm not laughin', Tom! That's a bad sign in a gal of eleven! A bad one indeed! What else?

Nothin' you can pin down, I said. Her muscles have just gone plum to wrack and ruin, though.

Ho. Hah!

What?

The apple cometh to ripeness upon the bough, he cried softly to the dusk and rocked and his stomach growled shrilly again and he chuckled some more.

What?

Shhhh. Hush, boy. It's her!

Cathie? I whispered, blushing with nameless shame and jumping to my feet.

No, he said softly. It's my little dear. My Peggy. It's her birthday and I've got a little gift.

And I saw it in the lampshine in his palsied, dead-white hands—something shapeless and foolish wrapped as fancy as he could make it in a bit of brown paper and a ribbon he had stolen from the box in Aunt Sarah's quilting room. I shivered and bade him good-night and fled softly up the hallway and there was a cricket somewhere in the wood and it cried so silver and sharp in the motionless, limpid blackness that it seemed speaking on my shoulder.

Peggy? he cried softly in the stillness behind me.

And I thought to myself: I will run out the back door quickly, before I hear her black, small shoes go padding to him, before I hear the bell of that small, ghost voice as it rises before his believing blind gaze. It was dark now and there was no moon and the mists lay on the meadows below the road like a white swaddling with trees rising amidst it like motionless soldiers, in a snow field. I thought: I will go to Dulcie's house and talk to Doctor Willie. And I hurried, knowing all the way through the darkness of our barnyard, tumbling up the hill through the twinkling dust of fireflies and all about me on the still apron of the hill, sheep lifted blunt noses and tinkled and bleated their sheep-dreams and scattered pell-mell down the hard, narrow trails. I saw the lamp far off and gold behind the curtains of Dulcie's parlor and knew they had not gone to bed, and I hurried through the graveyard, running lightfooted on my heels so the dreamers would not waken and yawn their ivory jaws

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and turn troubled in their long rooms, ran along the backbone of the hill into the hair of the wind and saw where the moon was, after all: curled and cunning in a chestnut tree by Dulcie's stable.

I rapped softly and waited and rapped again and something sighed beyond the panels and Doctor Willie opened the door and stood there smiling at me in the light of that faint August moon: stood there with the quietness of the small house pouring over his shoulders like a soft sea of cinnamon-scented air.

Do you feel the need of medical attention, Thomas? he inquired with a twinkle. Or did you just come to be sociable and have a dish of Dulcie's Italian Cream?

I'm fine, Doctor Willie! I said and watched him smile again and spied between his yellowed long teeth the black nail of the clove.

Yes, I said, sitting carefully on the embroidered shepherdess on Dulcie's special company chair. It's Catherine Ellen Hornbrook I'm worried about.

She is not well?

Mighty queer!

Eh?

She's actin' mighty queer these days!

Ahh? How so?

Her chest hurts her!

And you? How are you, Thomas?

Me? Oh, I'm fit as can be expected, Doctor Willie! Fit as can be expected.

That's fine, boy! These are trying times!

Do you reckon? I said lowly, with the sudden dreadful presentiment that I would soon be left alone in the world. That Catherine Ellen has consumption?

Thomas! cried Doctor Willie, bowing to me gravely and chuckling to himself over something very secret, something very wise and old. You may as well know it now—.

What? I gasped softly and felt my palms grow wet.

We are all suffering from a sore disease, boy! I am a man of medicine and, however melancholy it may be, I will not keep the truth from you—!

He fetched a black crooked stogie from the inner pocket of his immaculate white coat and fumbled in his vest for the silver cutter, holding the stogie aloft, meanwhile, like the wand of a conjurer while I waited, caged in dread.

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We are all mighty poorly, Thomas! All of us—mighty, might-y poorly! And would you like to know the name of our affliction?

Yes.

Time! Time, dear heart. I doubt, Thomas—(and he bent on the words, eyes bulging with the drama of it)—I doubt if we shall live out the century!

I scowled and itched with puzzlement and thought how grown-ups never spoke out plain: never handed you the truth without a fancy wrapping round it. But now Dulcie came into the parlor with Cynthie in her wake, bearing between them a blue willow-ware platter of fresh bread and strawberry preserves and a golden stone pitcher of chilled Jersey milk from their dappled, sweet-chymed cow.

Good evening, Thomas! Pleased you could come!

Dulcie wore a lace bonnet and she never smiled with her small, pursed mouth though her eyes were sometimes full of it: a mocking, slow irony and a gentleness even about that. Like Cynthie she was spare as a bird—wrenlike and chipper and fond of old woman's fripperies and one might have thought her trivial until she spoke or until she turned her dark piercing eyes upon the wisdom of a thing, or on the folly of some person. Cynthie was one of the foolish ones of this world: she simpered and giggled almost continuously because she was frightened and believed, like as not, that in giggling lay safety. Dulcie was practical and put up fruit against winter but Cynthie saved string imagining a time of poverty, perhaps, in which the world should grow bare of string and she would have none and none, in fact, would be anywhere: a desperate stringless time. Dulcie looked upon life's functions with a plain candor and although her marriage to Charley Lindsay had been an arid season she knew, at least, what she had missed. As for Cynthie she never guessed what there might have been to miss and I am convinced that through those long, strange evenings when Charley rode the river road to her cottage there was nothing more between them than euchre.

Thomas! said Dulcie in her faint but snapping voice. You look peaked! I don't believe Sary feeds you good! Eat that bread and jelly and drink your milk. Pshaw, Willie, don't that boy look underfed to you?

But he had slipped off to his pantry cup and stood in the shadows somewhere in the little house, eyes shut, shuddering a little under the impact of the half cup of brandy, sucking the bitterness of it from his mustache.

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He's drinking again! Cynthie observed in a harsh whisper that shook her onyx earrings, announcing it as if it were a new fact of Willie Curtis' life and not the habit of four decades.

Pshaw, Cynthie! Tom knows Doctor Willie is a drunkard!

Dulcie, I declare! You're just awful!

Well it's true! There's no need to hide the truth—nor to dwell on it neither! Thomas, how's the little Hornbrook girl!

Poorly, I sighed.

Pshaw! I hear her and you come whoopin' through the graveyard every day like red Injuns! How can she be poorly!

I shrugged glumly and stared at my hands.

I think, I whispered, that she has taken the galloping consumption.

Shoot! She gallops enough. I declare, Cynthie, young people seem such fools since I was a girl! Thomas, drink your milk—it'll put meat on your bones! Willie, come look at Thomas—I think he's got the solemncholies!

Doctor Willie came back into the room, some steadiness gone but no elegance lacking and snorted and sat down in a rocker with his legs dangling like a child in long white pants.

Willie, mind now and don't overindulge—the Bakers expect you at Powhatan tomorrow noon. Ellen Baker is quick with her child and you know there's no one else can come! Mind now!

Madam, I have not had one drop of brandy since Christmas!

Hah! Well Merry Christmas then, you old fool! she snapped and her eyes laughed again.

Thomas, what word is there from the father?

What father, Miss Dulcie?

Why Catherine Ellen's father—Bige Hornbrook?

He writes sometimes, I said. He's gone off to the prairies!

Gone to the prairies has he! Like as not to join up with those fools who'll have our rooves down around our ears before they're through.

Bige says there's going to be a War, I whispered and felt a proudness tingle my legs as if he were my father, too.

And there will be! she cried. With a bunch of damned fool men to start it and the women to endure it as they always have and take care of their orphans and wait hand and foot on the poor crippled ones that come a-draggin' back! Lord, I mind Mexico! Such a pack of fools!

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Abijah is not a fool, I said a little archly. He's goin' to be a King.

I finished my milk, keeping my eyes in the cup till the whiteness was gone.

So Bige aims to come back to the bottoms a King, eh? Well, Lord knows he might at that. Lord knows who'll be King when these fool men get done with the ruckus Mister Calhoun's stirred up!

Cynthie nodded at each thing Dulcie said and regarded me meekly with eyes as blue as double wash-water: innocent newborn eyes, it seemed: foolish and pleasing as a lamb's. It was Dulcie who knew the wide world's ways while Cynthie had grown both deaf and blind to all mortality, heedless of time or of human orneriness.

And I reckon your Aunt Sarah would be fit to be tied if she knew you was here, eh Thomas?

But it was not a question at all because when she had said it her eyes crinkled again in a smile and she snatched up the blue platter and went to the kitchen for more bread and strawberries.

Mister Curtis says there'll be a War, too! said Cynthie in that soft, high quavering voice that seemed to come faintly always as if through water. The snow shall fly again, he says, and then there'll be a War! Ain't that so, Doctor Willie?

It is so, Miss Lindsay! It is so!

Tell young Thomas about Mexico, Doctor Willie! Thomas, Doctor Willie rode with Winfield Scott—such a *fine* man!

When I was a boy fresh from school, Thomas, I went up the mountains with Pillow's Third Division and I was at Chapultepec and Churubusco and sawed off more legs and arms than you've cut stove wood! And I thought that war was the finest thing mortal man had ever done! Proud of it, d'ye see? And it took me thirty years of reflection to find it was a war of cowards and bullies. But what good does it do to tell you that! When the War starts in the South you'll like as not want to enlist as drummer boy! Pshaw!

He sprang down from the rocker and pointed, his head thrown back and his mustaches stirring like a bleached flag.

Look yonder, boy! There by the window in the glass case. The mask!

That, too, was the magic of Dulcie's house. I went to where he was pointing, to the round-bellied curio cabinet by the window and stared inside at the ordered litter of nautilus shells and souvenir handkerchiefs from Mister Barnum's Museum and the arrowheads and the little button box crusted with seashells and the ivory fan from India.

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I stared at the mask, too: a hammered copper oval the size of a man's face, its metal brown with time and rains and scarred perhaps by the fires of some old Armageddon. He fetched a tiny key from a tiny amber glass on the mantelpiece and unlocked the glass door and lifted the mask out.

Looky here, boy! Here—hold it to your face and look at me through it.

I held the mask to my face. It had eyes cut out the slant-shape of a Chinee's eyes and the cheeks of it were long and flat and rippled with savage, faint marks like the tattoos of a Sandwich Islander. I stared at Doctor Willie through the savage, ancient slits.

I dug that mask out of the big mound up yonder at Elizabethtown! he exclaimed. That mask, boy, that was made by the hand of man dead and moldering a thousand years.

Injuns?

Pshaw no! Injuns never made masks—not out of metal leastways! The Lord God Himself only knows what people made that thing. But mind this, Thomas—the man that made that mask was mortal like you and me! Get that? Mortal. And where is he now? Gone to dust, that's where! Gone to dust and sprouting up in the corn and blowin' on the roads! And mind you—his were a people proud and powerful long before the Injuns—though I've contested that by the hour with Major Tomlinson on the courthouse steps! Gone, Thomas! And if he had a flag that's gone, too! You may be breathin' his mortality this very minute and the dust of that flag, as well! Sure! And I will allow he thought he was the best man that ever lived and his people the chosen of whatever God he had! I'll bet my last shinplaster he even thought his wars would save the world! And what's left, Thomas! A sheet of copper with the green, moldering ages crusted on it and the eyes that looked out of those slits where your eyes peer—dust! Dust! I tell you Time is our sickness, ladies and gentlemen! We shall not live the century out! And Pride is our crutch. Lord, but the Almighty Jehovah must be plaguey sick of drums by now! Caesar in Spain! Hannibal on the Alps! Frederick and Tippecanoe and all the rest! Preachers'll tell ye there's a Hell and Heaven, sir! But I say there's a Third Place and it's called the Old Camp Ground and it is populated by the ghosts of poor idiots that followed a drum!

Somewhere behind him in the sea-green house a clock struck in punctuation to his words and Dulcie came back with more bread and

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preserves just as I rose to leave. She fussed and fretted that company never stayed long enough and I thanked her kindly and said I'd better get home before Aunt Sarah sent Coy hunting me. From afar I could see the tiny black shape of Aunt Sarah in the golden oblong of pantry window under the dappling apple boughs. She was waiting for me when I came in and from the way her black eyes twinkled I believe she knew where I had been. But she said nothing; I think she was abashed for the way she had bared herself to Cathie and me that day.

Get along up to bed now, Thomas, it's past nine!

Yes'm.

I went up the pantry stairs and then because the glory of something in Doctor Willie's voice had stayed in me and stirred me like strong drink I turned suddenly to her on the stairs and cried out: There's goin' to be a War, Aunt Sarah! Can I go?

Hush, Thomas! You're a child yet!

I'm twelve! I cried in the cracked-voice humiliation of my halfway years.

God knows if you will go, she said strongly to the darkness outside the window. He will dispose whether you go or not and if you return. It's not for me to say or you either, Thomas! Go to bed now, child! There'll be no war tonight at least!

• • •

I dreamed through that dark August night. I sweated in my sheets and turned my face to the moon until it burned and then thrashed round and lay with my sleeping face to the dusky, faint flowers in the faded, stained wallpaper and the dream wound me round. I had heard a night bird whistling when I fell asleep. And I thought to myself: It's a bad thing for birds to sing at night, the moon troubles them, I guess, and they sing because they are afraid. I had heard Toot say that once and I thought it must be so because Toot had known God when He was a boy, innocent and free and lonely in His garden with no child named Adam to cheer Him by the supper fire. Toot must be right because Toot had told me once that when the snowball bush bloomed in the wintertime it was a sure sign of death and it had bloomed the week my dog Cato froze in the laurels above Fish Creek with a stiff, staring hare locked in his grinning teeth. I dreamed that I had the gold mask that old Adam had worn and it was mine now and when I put it up to my face it suddenly

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grew into the flesh of my cheek and brow and lips and shaped itself to the shape of me. And I went to the browned, watery mirror in my Grandfather's room and looked at myself to see who the mask made me be and I saw who it was and it took my breath away. Abijah. Yes, and Cathie came into the room then and looked at me, crying, and stamping her feet the way she used to do when she was little and shouted: Take it off! Take it off! You're not Abijah! You're not! It's just pretend! You're not Abijah! And outside the house someone was beating a drum and someone else was playing a fife like when the Fourth of July parade happens up at Elizabethtown and the little darkies sell pink lemonade round the courthouse yard. Cathie hollering at me to take off the mask and the drum getting louder and the fife getting louder and she came at me then with her face all wild and ugly like Aunt Sarah's face sometimes when she's mad and she put up her fingers to pull off my mask and I hit her. I hit her again and again and again with something long and thick and killing and she fell across me and I could feel the warm blood jetting and hot all over my belly and I kept trying to push her off but she was heavy with deadness. And I woke up then panting and gasping with my fingers in the feathers of the bolster and my eyes blinking in the burning summer moon and thought: It's real. It's real. Oh Lord, I really done it. I killed her. I done killed Catherine Ellen. Because I can feel it still all over my stomach, thick and hot and dead under my nightshirt: the blood of her.

I lay for a long time hearing the fife of the night bird and the drum of my slowing pulse and dreading morning when I would have to look and see if the wetness was really her blood after all.

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Toot met me in the kitchen doorway scowling and suspicious.

What you doin' with de spade dis time of morning? Shoot! De ol' rooster ain't even crowed yet!

Nothin'! I bleated, blushing wildly.

Sho now! I seen you put it back in de smoke house wid my own two eyes and Suse did, too! And I heared you up and bustlin' 'round de yard 'fore Miss Sarah even lit de lamps!

I buried a dead bird, I lied, and she sniffed and turned the mush in the sputtering grease of the black skillet and went to call them to breakfast.

May Tom and me have the mare this mornin'? said Cathie when

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Aunt Sarah had finished her coffee and seemed kindly disposed toward the day.

No. Coy needs her to haul fence posts from the west pasture.

Yes'm.

What do you want her for? Seems like you children ride that poor beast to death. Where do you go?

To see about Abijah's boat, Cathie said with a shy, proud smile. He meant for me to mind it for him till he gets back.

Pshaw! That boat! It's the laughingstock of every river man in Wheeling! If Bige Hornbrook meant to leave the river and go off about whatever nonsense took him South then he should have sold that boat to someone who could get some good out of her!

Oh no! Abijah would never sell the *Nellie Queen*!

It's not proper for a child to refer to her father by his Christian name!

He likes me to, said Cathie, eyes downcast with angry pride.

That doesn't matter. It's impudence. If I'd ever dared to address my sainted father as Michael he'd have had my hide off with a buggy whip. You've a sight more manners to learn than you've got now, Miss Hornbrook!

Yes'm.

And that fool steamboat of your father's is better off left to rot down there on the creek bank where he left it. Pshaw! A man who'd put an old woman and a child ashore and then go off gallivantin' ain't fit to be pilot! Steamboatin's for responsible men of Christian character.

Cathie suddenly took a long drink of milk and hid her blazing eyes behind the cup a long time after the milk was gone and her throat had stopped swallowing. Aunt Sarah went off muttering into the morning and Cathie ran out the back door and stood under the apple tree looking off toward the hill behind which the white boat towered.

Let's go see her today, Tom, she whispered. I'm worried about the *Nellie Queen*. I had bad dreams about her all night long! Wasn't last night an awful night to sleep?

I gave her a quick, darting glance but I thought: she couldn't know my dream any more than I could know hers. But I wasn't sure.

It was too hot to sleep good, I said. And the moon was in my face all the livelong night! And that fool mockingbird kept singing in the apple tree!

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Oh yes! I just love to hear them!

Well, I don't! It means evilness when a bird sings at night!

Who said?

Toot did.

Oh. Well, it *did* sound pretty!

I couldn't sleep good.

I know, she said, not looking at me. I could hear you crying in your sleep. It woke me up. I could hear you all the way in my room.

I said nothing, stumping on ahead of her, a stick in my hand now, punching the dust beside me like a gypsy's staff.

Tom—.

What?

Tom, what were you burying this morning?

I stopped and turned and stood facing her.

Nothing.

Yes, you were. I heard you go downstairs long before sunup and after a bit I looked out my window and saw you walking down from the smoke house with the spade over your shoulder and your nightshirt under your arm.

Suddenly I wanted to hit her like I had done in the dream and that scared me and I laughed like a fool and began whistling a jib.

What *were* you, she teased while I thought of an answer.

The bird, I said at last and turned and walked into the sunlight safely.

The mocking bird?

Yep.

You never!

I did too! I just couldn't abide that daggone whistlin' any longer and I went out and took a rock and fetched him down off the branch of the plum tree slick as a whistle! And then I fetched the spade and buried him.

That's a lie.

It's not.

It is too, because I heard that bird singing long after you'd gone.

That just shows you! I cried, inspired. Toot said it was a witchy bird! That was its ghost singing.

And she said no more and we walked on into the morning and I frowned, wondering to myself why I had done that thing: gone and buried my nightshirt there in that cool shadow before sunrise, like

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a murderer, under the plum tree, spading out the cool, small grave in the secret shine of the morning star.

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We spent the whole morning on board the beached and splendid *Nellie Queen* and Cathie found a ring of tiny bronze keys in a box in the pilot house and we tried them and found each one unlocked one of the staterooms below. In the texas we both stood, fingers locked and tongues still, and stared up at a framed daguerreotype of Cathie's dead mother—her faint, frail face dark and violent as a gypsy's. On a hook hung a faded blue gown that she had worn once —Abijah would never throw any of her things away. On a shelf we found a tortoise-shell box full of glass gimcracks that she had treasured and her silver-mounted comb and a hand mirror that was cracked and when I lifted it my own face seemed halved and shifted in a bewitched and frightening way and I put the mirror quickly back and smelled a faint perfume in the air: a something of that long-vanished flesh that still persisted in the place where she had been loved. We spent an hour unlocking all the staterooms softly and peering in: the Ohio, the Virginia (an old beaver hat and a bundle of Travelling Menagerie posters still lay on the bunk) and the Kentucky where Cathie showed me the hole where the bullet had gone into the wall the night a gambler had killed his wife with a little dueling pistol. By ten the day burned and stagnated in the creek hollow and we lolled on the texas deck and listened to the mud-dawbers crawling up the shimmering air and the redbirds flashing and quarreling above us in the blue fever of sky.

Far off where the river shimmered we heard the blast of a tin horn and jumped up and ran to the stern of the boat and peered out over the paddles toward the trees. Behind the green curtain of willows we could see the slow movement of a small hooded craft and when it came to the mouth of the creek we saw the peddler at the till and he blew his tin horn again and we shouted and waved. He saw us and fought the long covered boat into the creek and rowed up abreast of the *Nellie Queen* and took off his leghorn hat and peered up at us, squinting into the sun.

Where's the master of this hyer boat?

I had opened my mouth to claim that honor but Cathie hollered back to him that Captain Abijah Hornbrook had gone ashore on business and left her in charge.

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Need any buttons? Need any pins?

Yes! she cried and I saw the hunger in her eyes to see the peddler's fancy store and I was curious, too, and followed her down to the boiler deck where the peddler now stood. He was the skinniest man I'd ever seen and his hair was white as calf-slobber and his face was wrinkled and sunburned.

Er you the Cap'm's daughter?

Yes, sir, I am! she cried, curtsying.

Well, whar's he at!

Gone ashore, I said! she cried. To tend to business! And I'm in charge of the *Nellie Queen* till he gets back so don't try any impudence!

Do you need pins? Can I sell you some needles er a piece of purty ribbon? Sa-a-y! Bet that feller yonder could use a jew's-harp! I tuk on a box of 'em at Wheelin' and I bet they won't be a one left 'gainst I put in at the Falls! Shore, now! How about a dress! Got a fancy calico! Shucks, I derned near sold ever' last tarnal one of them dresses up yonder at Elizabethtown but somethin' told me you'd be here and needin' one! Yes, ma'am, hit war just like I knowed afore-hand you'd be a-standin' right there whar you er now on the boiler deck of yore daddy's boat and I saved this hyer last dress fer you!

He had gone back under the strange, patchwork canopy of his little boat and came out with the thing in his arms—the folds of it blowing in the sudden gust of hot wind that had come up behind him from the river.

It's beautiful! she breathed softly. Oh, Tom, it is beautiful!

Shore it is! Fit for a Queen!

Yes! For a Queen, she said in that trance, beside me.

Want to know somethin', little miss? I sold a dress just like this'n hyer to Mister Charles Dickens himself when he come through Wheelin' years and years ago! And ye know what else? He declared up and down that he'd take it back for old Queen Victory herself 'cause it was just too tarnal purty for *gentry*! Them was his words and I'll swear to it. Too purty for gentry! There now! Three dollars! And that's just naturally walkin' off with it!

Could I—hold it up to me?

Why shore! Hyer!

She took it and held it to her shoulders with quaking fingers and let her eyes run down its length in a kind of fearfulness of such beauty.

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Lawk! Hit's a shame you hain't got a peer glass, ma'am! You look fancier than the President's lady!

Run fetch the mirror from Mama's shelf! It's in the texas, Tom.

I went and got it and came back with a leaden heart, knowing how sourly the bright interlude must end at last, when he found out the fact of our poverty. But I held the cracked hand-glass before her while she pranced and curtsied in it like a bewitched bird, wild with longing and so lost in the dream that nothing could snatch it away. The peddler fetched his knee a slap with his ragged yellow leghorn hat and crowed at the sight.

Lawsy, it was made for you, miss! When does yore Pap get back?

She let the dress fall to her waist then and stared at him gawk-mouthed for an instant. Then she thust the dress out for him to take back and stared off up the shimmering road, to the groves beyond where the wild birds cried in the coolness of the pawpaw leaves.

Three dollars hain't much! he sniffed. For a store-made dress like that!

I don't really need it! she cried. The Captain's gone to Elizabeth-town to buy me a much prettier dress than that!

Why, pshaw! I thought you was real taken with it!

It's nice, I'll grant you! she said. For some girls. Maybe some of them yellow gals down on the landin' at Cincinnati!

Shoot! Hain't one of them nigras could buy a store-made dress like this!

Just the same! she said, turning away from him and cocking her head at herself in the cracked looking glass. I don't think it goes with my eyes!

Two-fifty and, by Jingo, I'd starve and dry up and blow away if I was to give my stock away like this ever' time I put in to shore!

No, she said. When Abijah—when the Captain gets back—.

And she stopped, not in a sob, but in a way that made me know, without seeing, that her white teeth were fixed tight in the fullness of her lower lip.

Well, I declare! growled the peddler and wallowed off back to his boat and sat in the shade of it scratching the sandy hair under his hat and spit in the water.

How about some pins? Or horn buttons? Or a piece of fancy ribbon mebbe?

She walked away to the *Nellie Queen* with an elegance that could have been either disdain or downfall or pride either and it was only

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I who knew which. And directly the peddler's oars creaked off into the stillnesses of humming noon and faded, finally, into the hovering, lacing whine of wasps and the pirate honey-bees in the meadow's high clover. I followed her and laid my hand on her stiff, trembling shoulder.

Sometimes, I said, a body has to tell a lie.

And before I could catch my breath she spun round and struck me flat-handed across the lips.

I never lied!

There was a taste of blood like pennies on my tongue and I tried to remember what it was I had dreamed under the moon that night, under that night long washed away: that dream of killing.

Don't say I lied! she wailed, wild-faced and sorrowing and proud. Because it's true! It's true! He'll come back! And he'll bring me a dress and it'll be *silk* and not any cheap, common river-peddler's calico! And pins! Gold pins! And ribbons for my hair!

Her face dissolved in a wash of mad grief and she turned and ran.

I hate you! I just hate and despise you, Thomas Christopher!

And she ran ahead of me all the long way home.

• • •

Toot missed my nightshirt in the Monday wash and quarreled aplenty about it. She accused Coy of stealing it and he denied that and so she quarreled with the wash-water as if it might have prankishly dissolved my nightshirt just to tease her poor tired eyes. And she never thought to ask me what I knew and no one ever mentioned it again and I was left with only the abiding and corrosive memory of that night.

Hit's blowin' up a storm! said Toot that afternoon with a glance to southward through the pantry window.

There was not a breath of moving air in the house or outside in the burning sun, but I knew there were winds that Toot heard that no one else could know.

Hit's kickin' up my gout somethin' terr'ble! she cried, glaring out into the parched, quivering air beneath the apple tree. I can feel hit comin' long befo' the rain splatters on the window. Sho now! I reckon it's gwine to be a storm bad enough to blow down de mountains!

I don't see no clouds, I said. And the wind's not blowin'.

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Pshaw! You'll see! Thunder'll come a-crackin' down de river d'reckly! Sho now! You'll see!

I grinned at her and helped tighten the jar lids for her because in canning-time her fingers were too old and poorly for the task.

Aunt Sarah was up on the hillside showing Coy how she wanted the horseradish dug and he was loudly humming to himself because he was so cracking mad that she always told him how to do things that he was born a-knowing. And Toot grunted when the first far roll of thunder growled to southward.

What did I say now! she cried. Hit's a-comin'. My gouty foot don't never lie. Sho!

I went out under the apple tree and felt a space of coolness move around me for a second and then diminish, and stood wondering where Cathie could have gotten to and heard the ceaseless racket of the green summer winged-things in the hair of the hill and in the river meadow: they seemed hurrying to get things done before the storm, before the summer was quenched and ended.

Thomas?

She stood knee-deep in the ironweed on the slopes below Dulcie's house and waved at me.

Yes, Aunt Sarah?

Where's Catherine Ellen?

I don't know!

What?

I say I don't know!

Well go fetch her home! There's a bad storm brewin'.

Yes'm!

And I thought for a while she might have gone off alone down river to the boat and I angered at the thought: it was mine now too, and so was all the rest of it to share: the boat and the War and the King who would come riding in his time.

Ca-thie!

A sudden bright squawling gust swept through the yard and seemed to tangle for an instant in the apple tree and fling its boughs wildly and then go brawling up the meadow leaving a silver rippling shadow on the grass.

I called again but with no urgency in my voice because I knew where she was now and it didn't matter. I knew too well that special breed of loneliness that craves solitude and I would have bet my eyes that she was where I would have gone, where I often went, when

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that curious fever was upon me: to the attic and the wing of the roof that hugged one like the sheltering feather of a mothering hawk, to the most solitary place in God's creation.

I declare! I don't know what I'm going to do with you children! That girl, especially! I expect a Christian day's work from each of you and instead of that you seem to do nothing but wander about like dumb sheep! Did you call her, Thomas?

Yes'm.

Have you laid eyes on her, Toot?

No'm!

Gracious sakes alive!

She went to the great flagstone by the corner of the smoke house and stood with the toes of her high-laced boots touching the carved initials, worn nigh to obliteration now by time and wind and rain and moon: T.C. Anno Domini 1767—my Grandfather's father had chiseled them there in the time of the Iroquois, and the mad English king: she stood there shadowing her eyes with her fingers and scowling off into the impending storm: twenty-five miles down river, beyond the Ohio hills. I came and stood beside her and stared at it: the rim of blinding light fringing the far horizon and the purple gathering clouds above it: curling and moving now in high and sluggish tumult.

Sho gwine to come a-crackin' down d'reckly! cried Toot from the kitchen. Reckon I better fasten de shudders, Miz Sary?

Yes! Go shut them, Toot! Run help her, Tom! Gracious, I wonder where that Hornbrook child has gone to!

Toot and I ran round the house shuttering the windows. The air was calm as held breath before a quick word and there seemed to everything a sharpness of line: the black iron deer confronted his eternal hounds by the front porch, his nostrils fair quivering with alarm. The gum tree, three hundred yards down the meadow on the river road, seemed so close and vivid that a hand could have reached out and held it like a toy. And the darkness quickened and now small gusts of wind flung against the house like gales of small laughter and random rain drops broke in crystal on the windowpanes and thunder rolled like struggling armies, faintly.

Great day in the morning, Tom! Run see if that girl is in her room! Toot!

Yes'm.

Are all the shutters fastened?

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Yes'm!

I fled two steps at a stride up the carpeted staircase to Cathie's room but I knew she would not be there. I knew well and good where she was but I knew, too, how needful it is to be alone when this particular kind of loneliness comes like a storm of its own, a tempest in the brain; and I went to my room and sat on the small stool by my window and cupped my chin in my hands and watched the storm approach across the far-flung plateau of Ohio, beyond the river which, itself, seemed changed now, dark and bloodlike and all the willows on the far bank mirrored plainly now in shoal waters that the wind had not yet broken.

Thomas?

The thunderhead was black now and piling layer upon layer of still more dark and turgid purple upon itself until, even in that distance, it seemed to tower mile upon mile into the heavens and its heart, flickered and laced with lightning, showed the vast churning of long shroudlike mists. It stood up now over the whole of the south and seemed to lean now over our hill, over the house, over my very window and to begin a slow and inexorable collapse upon us all.

Thomas Christopher! Answer me! Is Catherine Ellen in her room?

Yes'm! I lied, because I thought she would have done that for me.

Well, tell her to get downstairs at once! And you too! Hurry now!

Aunt Sarah had a quiet and mortal fear of storms. I think she thought of them as a final explosion of God's long-suffering endurance: a smashing down of His fist in last exasperation. When the storms came from the river hills she would cover the mirrors and gather the whole household about her elbow and those of us that could be encompassed comfortably she would embrace stiffly in her stiff-clothed arms and keep us there until the wrath was past, as if she considered that should one impatient lightning bolt of angry Jove find us out and strike us to cinders at least there would be no lost children in Egypt.

Thomas? Mind me!

The armies of the rain breached the river now: the willows suddenly staggered under them as the white sheets broke in fierce onslaught and a split instant later the river reflections disappeared in a white ruffle of broken water like a fleet of arrows and the white shadow on the ruffled water swept swiftly toward the Virginia shore. It was wholly dark now, except for the lightning which flickered and snapped like a lantern swinging through a dark thick woodland.

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It was night and the day had not even ended and the house was in a midnight of hushed waiting for the storm's assault. And yet I knew that Aunt Sarah would not light one candle nor any lamp in kitchen, hallway or parlor. She would have no light in the house when storms came as if she imagined that God might think our small lamps offensive rivals to His lightnings, or that perhaps the dark judgment of His storm would pass us by safely if it could not see us huddled there by the cold stove in the fragrant, cinnamon-scented safety of Toot's pantry.

Thomas! Thomas Alexander Christopher!

Yes'm!

And I jumped from my stool just as the white rain exploded against the six panes of my window and the world dissolved and thunder fell about my ears.

Cathie!

I clambered up the ladder and peered at her in the shadowed eave, watched as her moon face turned and stared.

Go away.

No. Aunt Sarah's mad. You know how she gets when it storms. She wants us to come downstairs till it's over. You better mind.

All right, she sighed. It was so *beautiful!*

She got wearily to her feet and stood slender and frail against the slates for a moment brushing the cobwebs from her linsey skirt and then came toward me, her white toes pacing shrewdly along the narrow joist like small white birds. When I had gone down the ladder to make way for her and stared up at her brown heels hugging the rungs I saw that she had a sheet of Aunt Sarah's writing paper and a pencil in her hand.

What's that?

Never mind what! she scolded and hid it behind her.

What is it? That's Aunt Sarah's own private writing paper!

I only took one sheet.

What are you writing?

Thomas? Catherine Ellen? If I have to come up there after you I'll bring a switch or two!

Come on! Cathie cried with a brave laugh and folded the paper and hid it in her dress and the pencil with it and went gangling, long-legged and pigtails flying down the carpeted stairway to the hall.

Come here, children! By me! Joseph! Toot, run fetch Mister Christopher in from the parlor! Lord, it's a blessing to be blind with

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all this lightning. Here, Thomas! Catherine Ellen! By me. Here! Come with your stools!

And she embraced us in the stiff awkward angle of those arms so unused to the several shapes of love or its enfoldings: held us tight against her and put her chin up to the window and when the lightning blazed against the rain-swarming panes like a swinging torch I could see her dark pupils widen the smallest breadth and that was all; her lips would not quiver nor tighten and I think her heart did not even quicken but beat on, steady as the thick flowered gold watch that hung in her bodice.

God's a-wandering tonight! she breathed once and did not think we heard: it was a word meant for herself; and Toot came into the black pantry with Uncle Joe's white cane tapping behind her and squatted behind the stove with Suse and Coy and smacked her lips and rolled her white eyes in the gloom. Faint and mournful and lost in the tumult of the storm the whistle of a boat cried as it groped far away on the river channel.

Lordy God! chanted Toot softly. Hit's de *Julia Dean!* Out dere lost in all dis wrath! I bet Cap'm Newbolt sho' is prayin' fo' his rousters tonight!

We heard the boat's cry again: a rolling, chorded sob of sound and the thunder boomed and drowned it. And still the storm mounted and we knew it was far from its peak and the lightning quickened so that there were whole praying moments when the air seemed alive and shaking with light and the face of each of us, wooden and waiting there in helpless Mortality, would be silvered with it: all things bright as mirror-shine in that dreadful shimmering wash: silver faces and silver pitchers on a cloth of silver calico and the eyes of the blind man like silver grapes above his silver cane crook.

Sho! God's mighty wrothy!

Hush! cried Aunt Sarah, and Cathie stirred impatiently and I saw her face in the lightning in an instant's picture and her eyes were wide as if in the stare of a sleepwalker and her lips were curved in a smile of thralldom and glory.

It's beautiful! she breathed and Aunt Sarah heard her and twisted her head to stare down at the girl in outrage.

Hush, Catherine Ellen! Don't mock the fury of His elements!

I'm not! I'm not! she sang softly. Oh, it's so beautiful! I wish you could have been upstairs and seen it a-coming! So beautiful! Like a vision!

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Be still! And if you must speak—say a prayer!

Toot had commenced rocking in a furious, stubborn rhythm as if life and death depended upon that motion, as if by this bobbing to and fro she might persuade God to spare her.

I did see a vision! cried Cathie softly.

Hush! That's sacrilege!

But I did! I saw white armies on white horses!

I will not abide that talk now! Hush, Catherine Ellen! We are in the palm of God's wrath!

I saw them clash together in a meadow and fight a glorious war! And I saw Abijah on a white horse and he led them! Oh, it was so beautiful!

Sho! cried Toot. Ev'body talkin' 'bout heb'n ain't goin' dere! Sho!

Be still, Catherine Ellen!

You think I'm lying! Cathie said solemnly. You think I'm being untruthful when I say I saw that vision upstairs! It was like the Armies of God!

Be still! cried Aunt Sarah. On your knees before the wrath of a merciful God and still your tongue with these blasphemies against His wonders!

I won't! I won't!

And she tore free from Aunt Sarah's embrace like something uprooted by wind and the lightning blazed and lit us all, silvering the wild faces of Aunt Sarah and the girl, mouths open and working with angry words that the thunder drowned.

—not one of us! Aunt Sarah was screaming when the boom subsided. I say that you are not one of us! We are Christian people and we pray in the face of storms!

No! cried the girl. It's true! I'm not one of you! And I'm proud of that!

You are the Devil's own!

Yes! Yes! If you say it—I am the Devil's own! And glad to be! Let me alone now! Let me be! I never did belong and all your saying that I did was lies!

And she turned suddenly, in flight toward the pantry stairs, and the lightning failed but the etched shape of her stayed in my eyes when the darkness clamped back around us.

What's all the shouting? cried Uncle Joe, stamping his cane sharply on the floor. Be still. A body can't hear the storm with you women caterwauling!

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Let me go, Aunt Sarah!

What?

I gently tried to pry her arm loose from me with my fingers but it was locked round me.

Be still, Thomas. The storm hasn't even begun!

I want to go upstairs.

Thomas, be still! You will stay here. We will remain together until the storm is over!

No, Aunt Sarah!

What?

I want to go upstairs.

And I saw her face, agape and speechless at this mutiny, as the window lit again and shone upon us like a bursting moon.

To be with her? she said.

She doesn't understand, I said. She didn't mean—.

She understands nothing because she is not and never has been one of us. She is not a Christopher and I don't even think she is a Christian. She's got that mean Hornbrook blood in her.

Let me go, Aunt Sarah, I said again, not angry, but swinging down free of the rigid angle of bone and flesh and bombazine that ringed me in.

Thomas Christopher, how can you *tempt* God out there with the lightnings in His fist! she cried harshly above the crashing rain. Hear Him, Thomas! He is a God of vengeance! You are a man now, Thomas Christopher, and not a boy and He will hold you accountable—He who knows of every sparrow's fall! Where are you going?

I stared wild at her, clench-fisted and frightened beyond the telling.

She hasn't got *anybody!* I screamed above the rain, above the wind. Can't you understand that in your Christian mind! Can't you! She hasn't got anybody! Don't you see! Please! Please, Aunt Sarah! Call her back! God won't mind!

She was not even looking in my direction now: her face had lifted again to the window as if awaiting the blazing entrance of Jehovah. I ran up the stairs to Cathie's room and saw her on the bed with the paper and the pencil, stretched out on her belly with her face to the rain on the quartered panes.

Cathie! Cathie, come back downstairs!

But she did not move and I saw that she was waiting for the

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lightning to see to make a word on the paper—square black words from the tip of the broken pencil in her fist.

Cathie! I screamed, beating my fist against the door jamb. Come back down stairs! Don't make us be apart!

But she was not hearing, her pencil poised and ready to spring upon the paper and write when the lightning came again.

Cathie, listen to me! Turn around and look at me! Cathie?

I was afraid of her then: or more afraid perhaps that once I crossed that threshold to her room I would have cast my lot irrevocably and deserted these rooms which had sheltered me in the old, beloved safeties that I could not name; crossed the threshold from childhood into the time of man. I leaned against the sill and closed my eyes and thought: Aunt Sarah will call to me in a minute and when she does I will go back downstairs and it will be all right again.

• • •

I know that it was midnight when the storm subsided and passed us because the clock chimed, its own voice somehow breathless with aftermath and the whole house lay basking and spent in the peace of the rain-sound and the drip of it outside seemed the gentle pulse of something safe, while far away, behind the hills, the thunder brawled and muttered in the foaming flash-floods of the backland hollows. I was sitting beside her on the carpet stool, watching her face in the darkness on that bed where old Rebecca had died, in that little room with its cold, curious breath.

What was it you wrote? I said presently.

A letter, she sighed.

It's sure a funny night to write a letter.

No, she said. I had to. I just had to write a letter about the storm. And my vision. The white armies I saw!

She was still a while and I heard her folding the paper quietly and slipping it into her dress again.

Your Aunt Sarah doesn't want me to stay here any more, she said.

Pshaw! She don't mean half she says!

No, she said. I don't blame her. I'm queer, Tom. I can't help it! I just have to do things sometimes and I don't know why. I tried to tell everybody how beautiful it was! And she said it was a blasphemy against Him. And Lord, Tom! How could it be! It was Him that made it! You'd think she'd see!

She doesn't believe in that God, I reckon.

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There's not but one.

I know, I said. I know. But sometimes even I'm not sure. Sometimes it's just like I can hear Him up there in the room where Grandpa Christopher died—rockin' and rockin'.

It was beautiful! she said to herself and her voice was like a bright grass woven with the rain-sound. And I just had to write a letter to somebody.

I reckon he'll understand when he gets the letter, I said.

Who?

Abijah.

She was still a while, thinking I suppose.

It wasn't written to Abijah, she sighed. I wouldn't know where to send a letter to Abijah if I wrote it. It was just a letter. Not a letter *to* somebody.

But you don't just write letters—unless they're to somebody.

I know, she said. I'm queer and strange.

No, I said. I reckon a body *could* write a letter that was just a letter.

Yes, she said. That's what it was. Just a letter. I just wish there was somebody I could really write a letter to. I think writing letters is so beautiful—don't you, Tom?

Well, I suppose—I reckon so—. Yes, I do.

Don't you ever get so tight inside—the way a rooster must feel before he crows. You just get so full of things and there's only one thing to do—write a letter.

Now that the storm had passed, red and yellow shadows sprang up in the black house as Aunt Sarah sent Toot through the hall lighting lamps and candles and uncovering the mirrors. I wondered what she would say to us.

Listen, Cathie. Don't mind what she said about—about your not belonging with us. She gets queer when there's a storm.

No, she said. It's true. I don't belong. I never did, Tom. But I don't mind. I've got things inside that make it all right. I reckon I'd mind it pretty awful if I didn't have Abijah.

But just the same—don't pay her no mind.

But she was right, Tom. And God will punish me. I know that and I don't mind. When a body knows a thing is fair—they don't mind so bad.

Now Uncle Joe's cane thumped faintly down the hall rug in the house below and I judged from the copper clatter in the pantry that

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Aunt Sarah was putting water on for tea. In the drip and gurgle of the steady downpour, the thunder hunched and growled like an angry dog beneath the house.

Don't worry about nothing, I said, and put my hand on her head. She did not cringe nor move away and yet I felt her scalp quiver beneath my fingers and the spasm seemed to run clean to her heels.

. She sat a while longer with the letter in her hand: that letter to no one, to everyone, a letter to the Lord Himself. But there was no address on it: there was nothing but the bare envelope, and inside it the words that she had written by lightning and wonder. Now she tore her stare from the dark window and looked at me in quiet anguish.

I've been feeling it for weeks now, she said. Knowing that something—something bad was going to happen to me.

Pshaw! She never meant nothing by all that—.

Yes. She meant what she said. And it was true. She's been good to me—she was good to Aunty, too—took us in that time. I mind it all and I am beholden.

She done it because it was Christian.

I am beholden.

Well, sure you are! But you have to keep remembering that she's old and queer.

We stopped talking then and listened as Aunt Sarah came slowly up the hall stairs: we awaited her like prisoners at the bar, with no sound but her just, soft tread and the gentle sighing groan of the great house, still tired from the storm's ordeal, and the dripping of the long night rain.

Catherine Ellen?

Yes'm.

Thomas?

Yes'm.

She came to the doorway with the old tin candlestick and the dripping tallow taper and the wavering flame-shine painting the tired lines of her peaked face.

Go to bed, children, she said in a soft hoarse voice.

And she was gone, dragging the shadows behind her and I knew her so well that her not saying anything to us about our pantry rebellion was more eloquent than many speeches. She would say nothing until tomorrow—perhaps not until Sunday—perhaps not for a week or a month. She would keep the wound covered and bound

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and then upon the first occasion—snatch away the stained swathing and confront us with it: all the hurt and anger she had saved until that moment. It was worse, I think, when she said nothing and bore her cross like a Christian. Worse, by far.

She's forgot all about it! I said cheerfully.

But Cathie shook her dark locks in a soft rhythm from side to side.

No. She hasn't. She knows. And I know. He will punish me.

• • •

In the morning the whole round land shone with a crystal sharpness. The day was clear as cold spring water with slow herds of clouds like sheep upon the sky and summer gone: vanished in that wild metamorphosis of elements that had lashed the valley during the night. Gone, too, was our giant apple tree—wrenched in half from its trunk, rooted for a quarter-century in the earth above the smoke house, planted there, legend said, by Johnny Appleseed himself, and now tumbled down the slope by the wind like a ball of hay. Aunt Sarah was up in the barn with her parasol, poking slates and lath and shingles to see if the storm had unsettled them. And Cathie stood watching in the pantry window in sullen and aggrieved dignity as Coy came up the meadow in the buckboard with a sack of flour from Carly Juniper's. My fear that the storm had done damage to the *Nellie Queen* was so strong that I dared not even mention it to Cathie. But she seemed to read my thoughts.

She wasn't hurt by it, she whispered.

Who?

The *Nellie Queen*, she said.

You went all the way up there to see?

No. I went and looked—up in the attic. I went there before daylight and when the sun come up I saw the first light of it shine on the pilot-house windows. I could count every pane—like little diamonds.

Well then, cheer up, I said. Don't look so miserable.

She sighed and would not look at me.

A body can't be very cheerful, she said, when they know they've got a punishment coming. A judgment.

Pshaw! She won't punish you.

I don't mean her, she said.

Who then? I said, and she shook her head and looked away.

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