# THE OPTIMIST

SUSAN TABER

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JANIE, AN OPTIMIST

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# THE OPTIMIST

BY
SUSAN TABER

Author of "Unexpected Affinities," "The Jewel of Their Souls," "Country Neighbors,"

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TO
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A COLD spring, Mrs. Rawlins," the postman said.

"Yes, but we appreciate it all the more when it comes late."

"It's your way, ma'am, to think so," he answered stolidly.

She took the letter he handed her and entered the house. It was a neat little house and it faced the street uncompromisingly, with no yard between. And the town was like the house, old and pleasant and rather the worse for wear. They had both seen better days. The street was the only concession to business; but the ten-cent store opposite, the hotel just beyond, even the trolley itself, were in a subdued key, as if it was always Sunday. On every side one caught glimpses of salt water, and at intervals quiet little lanes shaded with trees led to the inlet. Mrs. Rawlins' garden overlooked it, too,



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and she paused by the window on entering to see if there were any signs of spring.

She was tall, and almost gaunt, her complexion was dark and her features rather irregular. It was her smile that misled you into thinking her beautiful —also perhaps the carriage of her head.

"A letter for me, mother?" a girl's voice asked. "Oh!" in a disappointed tone, "it's to you from the hotel."

"Probably about the Red Cross concert — put it on my desk, dear, and help me with the breakfast."

"Mother," the girl said a little later, "now you have had your coffee, prepare for bad news. The hollyhocks are all dead — the winter has killed them."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Rawlins. She rose and hurried into the yard. Everything looked desolate and bare, not a sign of green in the turf or on the trees — even the birds were still. In the border next the house, where last year the flowers had bloomed in all their beauty, were now heaps of blackened earth, dried remnants of the dead hollyhocks. The light died out of her face, and without a word she returned and took her seat.

"How you worked over them," murmured the girl.

"Jeannie," admonished her brother, "don't rub it in."

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"I enjoyed the work," Mrs. Rawlins answered, then with sudden resolution, "and only think how interesting it will be to make over the garden."

"I don't believe there is a thing in the world that you wouldn't find some good in," Jeannie said, almost pettishly.

"Yes, there is one thing," replied her mother.

"But when it came you would look on the bright side of it."

"I'm afraid not."

"And Mary Ann says," went on Jeannie, "that she doesn't see how you stand it."

"Stand what?"

"Living as we do, in Aunt Jane's old house after your beautiful place."

"I have always loved this house."

"And doing your own work after having twelve servants."

"Six," corrected Mrs. Rawlins.

"And leaving New York."

"I was delighted to get away."

"That is just what Mary Ann says — that you make the best of everything."

Mrs. Rawlins laughed.

"It was hard enough to make the best of Mary Ann even when she lived with me. Come, Jeannie,

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you will be late for school if you don't begin to get ready."

Jeannie's pretty little face puckered with perplexity.

"I don't see how you manage," she said at last, "the other girls all have such complaining mothers."

"And you are sorry you have not?"

"Please don't make fun of me."

"Don't be a fool, then," interrupted her brother, "you know mother isn't like anyone else."

"Be quiet, Eddie, I want to understand."

"Understand what, dear child?"

"How you can make the best of everything."

"I have told you that I cannot."

"Almost everything, then."

A warm smile flooded her mother's face.

"I try," she said, "to look on the dark side of other people's troubles and the bright side of my own — most women do the opposite. And now children you really must get ready."

She saw them off to school and returned to her work. The sun had risen and shone with the hard white light of early spring, before the leaves are out, lighting each dormant plant in the little yard, and showing up the dried remnants of the dead hollyhocks. A sharp wind, fresh from the sea, swept in through the open door.

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It was a quaint, low room, a little faded, a little shabby, with the charm that comes from old furniture pleasantly arranged, and old portraits on the walls. Mrs. Rawlins, leisurely dusting the papers on her desk, noticed for the first time the letter the postman had given her some hours before.

"How careless of me," she exclaimed, turning it over to read the address.

Suddenly her eyes widened. She passed her hand across them and looked again. She made an effort to open the letter — her hand went to her throat, she sank upon her knees before the window, staring blankly at the dead hollyhocks. The one thing had happened which she could not make the best of.

* * * * * * * *

The postman after finishing his rounds made his way to the hotel, with the laudable intention of fortifying himself against the effects of the wind.

"It do beat all, how some folks take things," he remarked as he sipped his whiskey at the bar. "Heard what Miss Rawlins said?"

The hotel keeper replaced his feet on the counter.

"No, do tell."

"'A cold spring,' says I. 'Yes,' says she, 'but we 'preciate it more when it comes late.' Beat that if ye can for lookin' on the bright side."

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"She'd need to," the hotel keeper replied, "after such a come-down."

"I say so, too — from a palace over Fall River way to that house of her Aunt Jane's — her that used to spend her winters in New York."

"What did you expect," the other answered with scorn, "old man Rawlins knew how to run a factory, that husband of hers never did — 'twernt in him. I always said he'd land it in the ditch."

"I dunno what Mrs. Rawlins would 'a' done after he died, if her Aunt Jane hadn't up and died, too, and left her the house."

"Was Mrs. Rawlins from here?" inquired a new voice.

The postman was so startled at this interruption, that he upset his whiskey over the counter and forgot it in observing the speaker. He was small and slight, his clothes were worn and there was nothing unusual about his appearance, yet the men before him had a sense of constraint, a vague uneasiness, as in the presence of a superior.

"Her folks have lived in this place ever sincc Massachusetts was founded," the hotel keeper answered with dignity.

The man he addressed gave a low laugh and rising from his place by the stove, sauntered over to the bar. "Have a drink with me," he said to

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the postman. "So you think Mrs. Rawlins looks on the bright side of things," he continued, when their glasses were filled. "She never used to."

"P'r'aps you knew her to New York?" the postman asked with an inspiration that left him breathless. "P'r'aps you're from there, too?" he finished in an awed tone.

"I am — unfortunately."

The postman was so electrified at this confirmation of his opinion that he stared open-mouthed and the conversation went on without him.

"So you knew Miss Rawlins in New York?" the hotel keeper asked in the manner of a lawyer questioning a witness.

The young man set down his glass.

"I did."

"Ever seen her since?"

"This is my first visit to your delightful town."

"Goin' to see her now?"

The postman had regained his breath.

"She's to home. It's your likeliest time to find her while the children are at school."

The other observed him curiously.

"So the children are at school?"

"Yes, Mrs. Rawlins waits in to give them their

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dinner; but it's early yet. She'll be real glad to see you."

The young man laughed.

"I don't know about that — but I'm inclined to find out. Thanks for the suggestion."

He paid his reckoning, nodded, and left the bar.

"A queer fish," the hotel keeper muttered.

"I wonder," the postman said, finishing his drink, "if she *will* be glad to see him?"

The street looked even quieter than before as Mrs. Rawlins' friend emerged from the hotel. A Ford car was drawn up at the curb while its driver discussed the weather with an acquaintance; two young girls were taking their dog for a walk; a farm wagon rattled by in a cloud of dust. It was growing rapidly colder and the biting sea air made the young man shiver when he stopped to light a cigarette.

"Spring weather, indeed," he muttered angrily.

The two girls, apparently intent on their dog, approached, furtively staring at him. He raised his hat.

"Can you tell me where Mrs. Rawlins lives?"

They laughed and pointed opposite. He had stopped in front of the very house he was looking for.

For a moment he smoked in silence, then threw away his cigarette, crossed the street and ascended

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the steps. At the door he paused and listened — not a sound. He laid his hand on the bell and paused again. The two young girls were watching him from the other side of the street; the man in the Ford car had begun to watch, too. He pulled the bell.

The sound reverberated through the house and out into the quiet street. For a time nothing moved, then he heard a step; it stopped, started, and stopped again. A second time he pulled the bell. There was a long silence. The door opened — Mrs. Rawlins stood before him.

It was he who spoke first. "You did not expect me so soon? May I come in?"

She stood aside for him to pass and he entered. His eyes took in every detail of the quaint low room — its faded coloring, its dim atmosphere of other days — and then returned to her face. She had taken refuge near a portrait of her Aunt Janc's, and something of the spirit of that Puritan gentlewoman had passed into her veins. There was no trace now of weakness and despair.

"You are more attractive than ever, Jane," he said coolly.

She made a repellent gesture. "Such remarks are thrown away on me now.

"Your letter asked to see me," she continued; "you

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did not wait for an answer. No matter," she sat down and pointed to a chair, "we may as well get this over. What do you want?"

He laughed.

"If I tell you I shall make you angry."

"That is finished."

"Very well then — I wanted to see how you looked."

Her eyes flashed.

"I told you not to speak in that way."

He laughed again.

"I said I should make you angry. Wait a moment," as she started to rise, "I promise not to refer to your looks — may I smoke? Now," when he had lighted a cigarette, "why should we quarrel during our short time together? Tell me, instead, how did you manage to efface yourself? I had great trouble in finding you. You don't mean," as she continued silent, "that was what you intended?"

"I did not consider you," she answered with dignity; "there was nothing left after the business was wound up. I was only too glad of this refuge."

"But why break with your friends?"

"It is out of sight out of mind with most of them; those who have not forgotten me, respect my wishes."

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For the first time a note of hesitation crept into his voice.

"I suppose you will not believe me — but I didn't know. I thought you had plenty."

"Would it have made any difference if you had known?"

"Probably not; I can't say after this length of time; but the fact remains — I did *not* know."

She made an effort to look at him and failed.

"You are just the same," she said, "life hasn't changed you."

He smiled ruefully.

"I am as I was made, I suppose. If I had lived a few hundred years ago, I should have been called a hero — now I am only a scoundrel."

"Where have you been?"

"Wherever there was trouble; first in the Philippines, while something was going on; afterwards in the Russian-Japanese War — the Czar gave me a decoration — then back by way of Mexico; but things were too hot there even for me."

"And now?" she inquired grimly.

"I got an infection after a wound; it was so bad it almost finished me — I had to come home."

She forced herself to look at him; for a moment he was off his guard and his face was drawn with pain; there were blue lines about his mouth.

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"I didn't suppose you could be ill," escaped from her.

"I didn't myself until I found out my mistake. Do you like this air? It strikes me as chilly."

She rose and closed the window beside her.

"I suppose," she said at last, with averted face, "that you want to see the boy."

"I am not a hypocrite, thank God; children don't interest me. I never have cared about them."

She raised her clasped hands.

"Is there anyone on God's earth that you do care about?"

"Yes," he answered, "just now I care about you. I am interested to know why you have changed. What has made you look on the bright side of things?"

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Because I hear that you do. I think you will not deny that when I met you, you were anything but an optimist."

"I don't deny it."

"And yet," he went on, "you had everything to make you so. I remember the first time I saw you — at a dance, wasn't it, in your own house? — I thought you just suited your exquisite surroundings. You felt differently."

"Yes," she assented, "I did."

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"You had friends, admirers, an adoring husband ——"

"Why mention him?" she asked with set lips.

"Why shouldn't I? He was everything that I am not, even if his mistakes sometimes annoyed you — but in those days you never looked on the bright side of anything. What has made you an optimist?"

She rose and faced him and he rose, too, with a look of involuntary admiration.

"What made me an optimist?" she said with passion. "You! Yes, you! After what I have suffered through you, everything else is tolerable. A woman who can bear what I have borne, has nothing to fear on earth — loss of money, comfort, friends, whatever people value, what do they matter to me? Nothing! You say I suffered when things went wrong, when people hurt me, when my husband made mistakes, I did suffer, because I dreaded the consequences! You have taught me that there is nothing left to dread. If I can live through this, I can live through anything, and what I have done my children can do, and those I love. There is nothing so bad but it can be borne. That is what has made me an optimist!"

He braced himself against her wrath, as he would have braced himself against a volley of musketry — when it passed it left him untouched.

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"I know I acted like a cad and a blackguard — but what could you expect? I was in a hole and there was no other way out — being what I am. Janie, you must see that if I had stayed, it would have been worse for you."

"Why, then," she whispered, "did you pursue me — from the first? I was married, I was doing my best for my husband, I was not your sort or in your set, yet you left me no peace night or day until you made me love you? Why did you do it? You must have known what sort of man you were."

"I suppose because I was in love with you; that seemed reason enough at the time."

"You say that after what you have done?"

"Of course, love doesn't change a man. I always told you I was no stickler for duty. I never deceived you. And, besides," appealing against her silence, "you speak as if I had made you wrong your husband."

"Was it your fault that I did not?"

"No, I must admit it was yours."

"And afterwards why did you commit the worst sin of all, why did you marry me?"

"What would you have me do? I was in love, and there was no other way to get you. I told you that marriage didn't appeal to me. You wouldn't believe me."

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"I trusted you in spite of myself."

"No, you did not trust me. You expected to reform me. You thought you could make me over. Isn't that so?"

"Perhaps I may have thought so — once."

"And during our year together, you tried to, didn't you?"

"Perhaps I did."

"Well, you ought not to have tried — you should have made the best of me — that was the only thing to do."

"Do you put the blame on me?" she asked with a despairing gesture.

"Heavens, no! I don't put it anywhere. I told you I acted like a cad and a blackguard. I might have just the same, no matter what you have done — I had to have my liberty."

"Was that why you deserted me; was that why you left me alone in the world, to bring up your boy?"

"If you like to put it so — yes."

He rose, took two or three turns about the room and lighted another cigarette. Yet underneath this airy manner a something showed that almost looked like shame.

He paused at last beside her,

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"It was decent in you not to give me away," he said in a sobered tone.

"My friends didn't need to know — I told them we couldn't agree — I took my old name and came here among strangers. There was nothing left to remind me of you. Why have you come back?"

"I don't suppose I could make you understand — yet."

She considered him as one considers some strange fantastic thing, exciting half wonder, half repulsion.

"I have tried to understand you," she said. "As you tell me we cannot change our natures. I was brought up to keep my word and to believe in duty. You are different. I suppose I did make it hard for you. I suppose I did try to change you — but I was punished."

"Don't worry," he said with a deep-drawn breath, "you have nothing more to dread. Put it that I came back to make you a philosopher — for you did dread meeting me."

"As people dread death."

"Well, I am living on too intimate terms with death to dread it. When it catches me, I shall just go off by myself as a dog does and trouble no one But in the meantime — I thought I would come back and say good-bye."

He made her an odd little bow. "Morituri te

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salutant," he muttered under his breath. If she heard, she did not understand; she was listening to the sound of a bell. It peeled out very slowly from the tower of a neighboring church. She counted the strokes.

"Twelve o'clock," she said, "the children will be coming home from school."

"Then I must go."

She caught his hand in hers.

"The boy, Ned, have you forgotten? You can't go until you have seen the boy."

He hesitated, his face softened, his hand closed over hers; then he dropped her hand and said lightly:

"Why should I? He will hear about me soon enough — I had better go before he comes." His eyes took in her every feature. "I want to remember just how you look."

She touched his arm and pointed. "There they are."

The children were coming home along the street, the boy leading. He caught a glimpse of his mother at the window and waved his hand; then seeing a stranger, he drew back and waited for his sister. His face was flushed; his eyes gleamed, he was a picture of youthful charm. For one moment his father's eyes rested upon him; the next he turned away.

"A fine boy," he said coldly. "I hope he will

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