Houghton Mifflin

Miss Boo is 16

Margaret Lee Runbeck

by the author of Our Miss Boo

Miss Boo is 16

Margaret Lee Runbeck

Title: Miss Boo Is Sixteen
Date of first publication: 1957
Author: Margaret Lee Runbeck (1905-1956)
Date first posted: July 19, 2019
Date last updated: July 19, 2019
Faded Page eBook #20190743

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

Miss Boo Is Sixteen

BY MARGARET LEE RUNBECK

Our Miss Boo
Time for Each Other
The Great Answer
The Secret
Hope of Earth
Pink Magic
Answer Without Ceasing
A Hungry Man Dreams
The Year of Love
Miss Boo Is Sixteen

BY MARGARET LEE RUNBECK

Miss Boo is Sixteen

1957

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON
THE RIVERSIDE PRESS CAMBRIDGE

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 56-11578

First printing December 1956

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE • MASSACHUSETTS
Printed in the U.S.A.

For W. B.
who started stern and became heart-shaped

Contents

Miss Boo is Sixteen

Now We Know

Getting a letter from your child is often a shattering experience.

Not quite as much of a milestone as the first time you hear her voice on a telephone, for that happens, of course, when she is just recovering from babyhood. Suddenly you realize she is no longer a cunning little ventriloquist's doll for you to operate as you please. From here on she will be an unpredictable individual, running under her own power, evolving according to some mysterious hidden pattern. Every day she will become more like herself and less like what you omnisciently have decided she should be. You may have thought you had an orchid; gradually you see it is a beanstalk or a daisy. From here on, your success as a parent will depend on how willing you are to help a daisy be a daisy, and not try to make something else of it.

The letters she writes you when she is out from under your hovering influence tell you more than news. Sometimes you're unprepared for those letters, often badly spelled and curiously phrased. For instance, when Boo was not quite thirteen we let her go away to summer camp, by no means certain we had done the right thing. After all, the camp up in the High Sierras was quite primitive. We had heard of mountain lions, and even more grisly, of rattlesnakes. We were timid about asking if brushes with these were exceptions or routine. But she cleared that up for us on a postcard sent after a week of wracking silence.

"Hi folks," the postcard said giddily. "Today we found a rattlesnake under our tent. The riding master killed it. Eeek! Boo."

Ghastly as that was, a letter worried me even more. It, too, came after we had heard nothing for days and days. The letter said:

Today we had a talk about sex. In case you're interested,

everybody has some kind. Also we found out we are all addle essence. They say that can give us a lot of trouble, and make your family mad. But you finally outgrow it. So here's hoping.

Boo

Well, she *has* outgrown quite a lot of it in the last three or four years. But we still have some distance to go. As for me, I don't want to hurry it, for I find it a delightful journey. Since I belong to Parents' Union Local 359, however, I must keep this fact to myself, and complain with the rest of them.

My experience has been that addle essence is strenuous exercise for everybody. Even when you let it get in your hair, you can't help acknowledging that its irrepressible honesty, its poetic beauty, and its radiant absurdity keep everybody in the vicinity from getting into a rut.

But it is a perishable commodity. The only thing you can be sure of, is that it doesn't last forever. For sooner or later, no matter how delightfully mad we may be in our youth, eventually we are swept off our feet by common sense.

Grownups Are Screwy

We were driving up from the desert and we had been lulled by the cozy intimacy of the car into dropping down the walls of discretion that often protect children from seeing adults exactly as they are. We had forgotten Boo and were all talking unguardedly to each other as if she were not present.

Then beside me I heard a despairing sigh.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Grownups!" she said eloquently.

"Grownups? What about them?"

She shrugged. "Grownups are so screwy," she said somewhat wearily.

"Oh? We are?" In the vacant air before me something very welcome was happening. I was seeing a magazine page with the words amusingly lettered, and under it, as by-line, our two names. As one does in the presence of material, I prodded gently.

"What are we screwy about, precious?"

"Millions of things," she said. "You're people who could do anything you want to do, and yet you hardly ever sit all day in a bathtub full of bubbles, eating ice cream cones and reading comic books."

"No, I guess we don't," I admitted.

"And you fool around with people you just can't bear."

"What else *can* we do, if they're under foot?"

"You could do what *we* do," she said impatiently. "When we can't stand anybody, they probably feel the same way about us. So we come to an understanding."

"How do you manage that?"

"We say, 'Listen, you. Scram. You play on that side and I'll play on this, and that way we won't have any pain.' "

"Does it work?"

"Mais *natch*," she said bilingually. "There are always plenty of people we do like. But grownups . . ."

“I know what grownups do,” I said. “We try to make-believe we’re just crazy about everybody.”

“And that makes you very cross, sometimes, with the people at home.”

I thought that over and decided it was true. “How else are we screwy?”

“Oh, you buy clothes like everybody else’s . . . then when *everybody* has ’em, you toss yours out. Too common. And you wash dishes. When everybody knows the best meals get eaten standing beside the refrigerator. Then all you have to do is brush the crumbs off the chest. You read books because everybody else is reading ’em, and if you missed last year’s best book, you wouldn’t dream of wasting your time reading it this year.”

“We’re too busy for that,” I said defensively.

“And that business about being too busy,” she said scornfully. “You have more time than we do because you don’t have to do Latin and Algebra . . . and what do you do with your time? Waste it boring yourselves.”

“I think you have something,” I said. “Maybe you and I could do a magazine article called ‘Grownups Are Screwy’ . . . might even reform a few of ’em.”

“I doubt it,” she said, “but you always say people like to read about themselves.”

“I’ll tell you what. You talk to some of your friends, and see what ways they think we’re crazy, and then we’ll see what we can do.”

“I’d be getting my money ready for college,” she said with enthusiasm. “And besides, I’d sort of like to see my name in print.”

But, like a lot of what seems to be good material, this was never impaled tidily on typewriter paper. About a week later she came home from school looking glum.

“I’ve got bad news for us,” she said.

“Oh? The Latin quiz?”

“Nope. The magazine article. I asked my friends what they thought. They say grownups aren’t screwy at all. *I* just spend my time with screwy grownups.”

Runch Is Leddy

The morning he came for the interview about the job, his arms were loaded with bundles. Something which looked like a brick wrapped in newspaper. Something also wrapped in newspaper which turned out to be a book. A third thing wrapped in newspaper which he didn't open throughout the encounter.

The bundles were the first thing I noticed about the small Japanese man. The second thing were his teeth. A mouthful of gleaming porcelain cubes which kept his lips from meeting, and gave him the expression of an astonished squirrel. I think he must have borrowed the teeth to make a fine first impression, for we never again saw him wearing them.

He weighed all of eighty-nine pounds, and his suit, of a mossy texture, was many sizes too big. With it, as he stood on the doorstep, he wore a Homburg hat, held up by his ears. His eel-colored eyes swam around alertly behind formidable horn-rimmed glasses which gave him a professional look.

I invited him in, not very hopefully. I had seen a great many applicants for the job during the last months. Some revealed the depths of their unsuitableness during the first interview, but some I rashly hired who stayed a few days, wreaking havoc on us. Now having exhausted the categories of couples (too expensive), widows (too morose), Scandinavians (too temperamental), attractive psychotics (too unpredictable) . . . I was venturing into the Japanese, fast vanishing from domestic employment. But this prospect didn't look very promising.

He said his name was Dr. Frank Frederick Ishinara. "Dr. only in Japan," he explained. The title supported the professional glasses, but didn't reassure about cooking and housework.

I showed him over the house, trying to make the kitchen as enticing as possible. He looked around disparagingly and made no comment, except about the eggbeater. "I buy new eggbeater," he announced. "This kind no good."

I introduced him to what might turn out to be his room and bath, and he said in his chirping voice, "Must have good light in room. Eyesight need very good light."

Then we went into the small library of our house, to discuss salary and references. He held the three newspaper-wrapped bundles on his tightly joined knees, and when I mentioned references, he unwrapped the package which was shaped like a large brick. There was his whole history, saved and yellowed. In

that bundle every month of the fifty years since he had come to America was accounted for.

He handed me the references one by one, treasured, tattered, but glowing. They read like nostalgic lyrics. My first thought was that, when he left us, my reference couldn't possibly live up to the elegance to which he was accustomed. I'd have to get new engraved stationary, for one thing. . . .

Of the twenty I glanced through before I called a halt, at least seventeen said in one way or another, "We did everything possible to persuade him to stay on with us. But he was determined to leave."

Having just survived a shattering succession of help which lasted one week each, and most of whom had to be evicted with threats, and finally bribes, the thought of having someone so good that we would beg him to stay simply brought tears to my eyes.

While I was reading this entrancing collection of letters, Dr. Ishinara was unwrapping the second of his bundles. This turned out to be a small yellow book, decorated with a frisky dragon eating lettuce. Across the cover, in hand-lettered script was the title, "Food for Nutritive and Pleasing."

He said modestly, handing me the book, "No obligation to engage author."

He tried unsuccessfully to smile around his entrenched teeth. I took the book and opened it. A recipe book. Written by Dr. Frank Frederick Ishinara.

"Avocado recipes no good," he said. "Confuse with artichoke."

I could see why this might throw the recipes off, so I made a sympathetic noise. My heart was beating wildly, for here was offered help, like the title of his book, both nutritive and pleasing.

But I had partially promised the job to a large German woman. She had brought me a sample of apfelkuchen . . . I would have to dispose of her; that was all. Even if I had to give her a week's pay. But I heard myself being businesslike, which is always an unnatural and disastrous position for me to try to assume.

"I'll have to let you know," I was saying. "I think we'd like very much to hire you. But I must think it over, and make a few arrangements. You give me your telephone number, and I'll call you tomorrow."

"No phone number, Missus," Dr. Ishinara said. "Maybe I telephone *you* tomorrow." His eyes twinkled mischievously through his glasses. "Maybe *I* have to think over, also." He arose with what I think is called alacrity, the pointed toes of his brown shoes (which must have been bought in 1913)

glittering cheerfully.

"Very nice we talk," he said regretfully.

I tried to hand back the book about food for nutritive, but he waved it off graciously. "I make you present," he said. With every atom of my judgment screaming for me to reconsider, I let him out the front door. I knew I was making a mistake, but the large German woman had intimidated me, and I *had* practically promised. Could we engage both of them? I had a cartoonish vision of our house exploding, blowing us all through the roof.

"I'll expect to hear from you in the morning," I said faintly.

"House very much big," he said, saving face just in case.

I closed the door and came back to the library, trembling with indecision. The little book lay on the desk, most appealing in its quaintness. It was apfelkuchen against book. Who was it that posed the choice between hyacinths and bread?

Suppose I *had* promised; it wasn't a signed contract. There must be ways of changing one's mind (as if I hadn't tried two million at least in the course of my lifetime!)

This was more than just a good houseman and cook being offered to us. This was adventure; you couldn't help knowing that. You might not guess what kind of adventure it would be, but it would surely be *some* kind. What, I wondered, had been in the third bundle? It was flat and square . . . Probably I would never know. The words in many handwritings on the sheets of embossed paper danced in my memory. "He is an original and charming cook," one had said. "He is scrupulously clean" . . . "no bad habits" . . . "faithfulness itself" . . . "cheerful and willing" . . . I must have been mad to have let him out of the house.

I tore upstairs for my car keys. The usual dragnet search through all my handbags and pockets produced nothing. I slit open the sealed envelope where I keep the extra keys (the sealing is supposed to help me treat these more respectfully as spares).

I backed the car out of the drive and roared down the street. It has always seemed a great advantage that the bus is only two blocks away . . . but now that fact was a big menace. He had probably caught a bus immediately. I could see him in my mind, sitting with his demure knees gripped together, riding farther and farther out of our life.

No eighty-nine pounds of picturesqueness, with two newspaper-wrapped

parcels clutched in his arm, was waiting at the bus stop. He had caught the bus and I had lost him. Lost him by trying to be sensible and businesslike as people are always urging me to be. The peril of common sense which doesn't come natural is that it waylays you perversely at the very moments when it should be thrown to the winds. There are persons for whom common sense is not sensible, and I am one such.

Other people were waiting at the stop, looking impatient. That indicated that no bus had passed recently! I jumped out of the car and ran over to them. "How long have you been waiting?" I gasped to nobody in particular. They brightened up, thinking this was some quixotic way of offering strangers a lift.

"Ten minutes at least . . . maybe fifteen . . ."

"Did you see a Japanese gentleman? Small . . . with large teeth?"

Now they knew I wasn't kind; I was merely crazy. They shook their heads and turned away. I hurried back to my car and drove it aimlessly around and around the blocks surrounding our house.

Then I saw him. Toddling along at a rapid pace. I pulled up at the curb beside him. He looked at me, not quite recognizing me. Also something was different about him, so we both stared blankly. His face had a totally different expression. He looked like a very young infant. Then I knew what the difference was. He had removed the teeth.

He beamed at me. "I take nice long walk," he said. "Ten-cent-fare stop twelve blocks nearer town. Mariposa Road."

"Please . . . I wish you'd come back," I said. "I don't have to think anything over."

"You like engage me?" he asked delightedly.

"I'd like it very much."

"Then we be engaged," he said. "I pleased also much." He tipped his Homburg hat courteously.

"Come, get in the car," I said.

A look of horror came over his babylike face. He stared at me a long moment, and I could see that the job was tottering in uncertainty. I had made an awkward and disgraceful mistake. If I didn't know it was improper for us to ride together, he wasn't sure by any means that he could afford to associate himself with such ignorance. Then he decided to forgive my accidental *faux pas*.

“I walk back to house, Missus,” he said with dignity.

“Very good,” I said, trying not to sound like a butler.

He started off at a sprightly pace, a very little and very ancient man who had obviously never considered growing old. Already I loved the spirit of him. But I knew our family would all have to prove our right to love him. For his dignity wouldn’t permit any too easy familiarity of affection.

I stopped the car suddenly at the corner flowerstall. They had showery bouquets of chrysanthemums on display. I must carry home a bunch for him to arrange; chrysanthemums would be an acceptably subtle welcome for a little Japanese gentleman, wouldn’t they? That transaction took me not more than five minutes, I am sure.

So I was quite unprepared for what happened when I put my key in the front door. It opened instantly. And there, beaming as if ten years of serving us lay behind the gesture of opening the door, was Dr. Ishinara. In an immaculate white coat. “I run home through alleys,” he said genially. “I surprise Missus?”

“But . . . but . . .?” I couldn’t frame the question so I rudely pointed at the white coat.

“I bring coat in package,” he said. “I think maybe Missus like engage right away quick.”

“But how did you get into the house?”

Now all the beam went out of the infant-like face. “I scold Missus. You leave back door open! Now that very bad way to be.” He glared at me fiercely. “*Anybody* come in, Missus. Very bad.”

I tried to apologize, meekly handed the flowers over to him, and retreated. I could see that already he had taken over the house. If we intended living in it, we were going to have to behave ourselves.

I ran upstairs and into my bedroom, breathless. Within an hour the destiny of all of us had been placed in a tiny pair of Japanese hands. I knew I had more than hired a cook. I had given us all into his keeping. We, and everything in our house, now belonged to him, for better or for worse.

A warm sunshine of well-being spread through my bones. Dr. Frank Frederick Ishinara . . . what on earth would we call him?

I must go down in a few minutes and explain the routine of the house to him. Then I must send him away to bring his bags. I would give him taxi money, of course, so there could be no slip-up . . . no changing of mind. I

wished I could go down to San Pedro Street and help him pack his belongings. He must be at least seventy years old, I thought. Or maybe even older. What would the rest of the family say?

Downstairs I heard the slightest shuffle in the hall. Then a respectful, cheerful, incredible little chirp.

“Missus?” he said.

I looked over the banisters down into the foreshortened hall. An incredibly kind little face peered up at me. The formidable glasses were gone. He was not a professor now; he was our cook.

“Runch is leddy,” he announced fiercely, defeated but unbowed by his *r*'s and *l*'s.

The Growing

Growing was certainly in the air! Yet it took me all day to realize exactly what it meant.

Everywhere we looked we could see that things were on the grow. That morning the gardener had had to lop off long exploring arms from the bougainvillea, because all of a sudden we couldn't see out of our bedroom windows. We had picked roses that were too tall for any of the modest vases we have in the house (our vases having been brought with us from New England, where hopes are plausible and conservative . . . and not preposterous as is the floral fact in California).

Boo got out a favorite gingham frock from the recesses of her closet, which somehow had been forgotten in her preoccupation with shorts and swim suits. She put it on exuberantly with the delight of finding something lost.

"My wonderful pink plaid!" she cried. "Imagine it spending the whole summer in the dark. Not even a moth to enjoy it."

But when she tried to button it, something was wrong. The buttons and the buttonholes weren't within speaking distance of each other!

"What on earth can have happened to it?" she cried indignantly. "You don't suppose it could have shrunk on account of not being worn, do you?"

"I've heard of that causing shrinkage. In certain types of clothes," I said, hardly daring to tell her the sober truth.

"I know what's happened," she said elatedly, "I've grown! I've definitely grown!"

"You definitely have," I admitted, because blithesome as is that news to her, it still has a wistful meaning to me. I know she'll go on growing; I want her to, of course. And yet. . . .

By this time she was walking around, delightedly surveying the outgrownness of the frock.

"Isn't it wonderful!" she cried. "I've grown at least an octave!"

I thought she meant only that stretched distance between thumb and little finger which occurs when she sits for twenty-nine minutes a day drumming out piano scales.

"Yes," I said, sounding depressingly like a parent, "you're getting to be a big girl now."

She went out and sat in the shade of the acacia tree a long time. She came back into the house and considered whether or not she'd do some cooking; she got out her roller skates and looked at them. She finally put them on, and just sat with her elbows on her knees. Then she took them off and came inside, and said in that particular plaintive voice I haven't heard for years, "I don't know what to *do*."

"What about?" I asked absently.

"About anything. There isn't anything to *do*."

"Nonsense," I said, "there are hundreds of things to do."

"Not today," she said tragically. "There's nothing at all."

I looked at her, and I saw that the usual bubble and squeak had gone out of her. She looked limp and loose-endy, like a doll when nobody is home to breathe life into it.

"Well, I'll tell you what," I said. "You can come with me. I'm going into Hollywood to do some errands."

Unenthusiastically she got into the car and slumped supinely beside me, looking out from under her golden bangs indifferently. There was simply nothing on the street. But I didn't insist upon opening the subject, because I have had days myself when there was nothing on my street.

At last she said, "I'll tell you what's the matter with me. Wanta know?"

"Yes, darling."

"Well, I'm halfway between."

"Between?"

"I'm getting too big for the things I used to like to do, and I haven't found out yet how people spend their time doing that other stuff."

My heart opened to her in a flood of understanding.

"That's nothing to be alarmed about," I said. "I hope you're going to be the kind of person who never finishes growing. You're going to keep on . . . long after school is finished, and college . . . long after you're sixty and seventy. . . . There will be dozens of times like this, when you're halfway between what was big enough for you yesterday and what will be yours tomorrow."

"I s'pose so," she said listlessly, staring straight ahead of her. But it was

only nominal agreement, because she couldn't see where she was going; and where she had come from was suddenly too tight for her to return to, like the pink gingham dress.

We had reached the bookstore now, and I got out. But she just shook her head when I invited her to come in with me. So then I knew how sunk she was. But I knew, too, that the remedy was at hand. I asked for my own books quickly, for now that was not the business of the day.

"But what I want mostly," I said to my friend the book-man, "is an armful of books for Boo."

"Does she ever find time to read?" he asked incredulously, remembering how only a couple of years ago she had hopscotched up and down his aisles, and worn him out with questions.

"She's about to," I said. "She just discovered time, and it's got her scared."

"We'll fix that up," he said, and the two of us hurried back to the rear of the long shop, where there are stacks and stacks of classified reading matter. He ran up his ladder and began handing me down books; I hardly had time to take them from his downstretched hand, because I was snatching up selections of my own. Then I realized that he was picking out books for himself-when-young as I was seizing books for myself. He had picked *Treasure Island* and *Ivanhoe*, and was trying to find some other title which he was muttering over and over to himself. I had found *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Life of the Bee*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and Flammarion's *Astronomy*, and was looking for *Mistress Masham's Repose*, which I couldn't find.

He came down the ladder, and I sat on the lowest step, and we talked and talked. He told me about how his father let him read anything as a boy, and about their barn with hay and a big high loading door . . . the finest reading room a boy could know, he says. And I told him about the way my father used to read aloud to us, and how many times we had read Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*, over and over.

"She ought to have something about the oceans," he said emphatically. "Or maybe we should save that for next year?"

After a while we both woke up suddenly and realized that we had been a long time back there in what the sign said was the Juvenile Department. We came up toward the front of the shop self-consciously, with our arms full of books.

"You don't want these wrapped do you?" he asked, and I shook my head, for we have a silent agreement that it is insulting to books to carry them out of

a shop wrapped and tied with string, as if they were some kind of captive merchandise.

Then both of us happened to let our eyes fall on the adult books around us. Dyspeptic books they were, with frowning letters making up the titles; worried fat responsible-looking books, with bloated economy and disgruntled diplomacy and atomic doom in their titles. Within an arm's reach were ten of them that spoke explosively of the crowded emptiness of today and the terror of tomorrow.

He saw me realizing this, and he said, "You know sometimes I have to retreat back into that Juvenile Department, or I'd go nuts."

When she went to sleep that night, the books were on a chair beside her bed. A few beatific sentences had been read out of each one, just to make sure each book was her own. I knew from her politeness that some were too young. . . .

"Wanta know something?" she said. "This has been simply a super day."

"Why do you suppose that was?"

"Well, first of all, I found out I had grown an octave."

There again was the word she had used this morning. I had accepted it then as her way of indicating a number of inches. But now I saw that she meant something more than inches. I didn't try to ask her. She had given me the word . . . she had given me the day, and I must interpret it for myself, as she had interpreted it for herself. I turned out her lamp and went downstairs, thinking about it.

We do seem to live through this life of ours in octaves. There *is* a rounded octave of desires and fears and accomplishments always present at whatever stage we are. When one scale is finished another will grow from it, recognizable yet lifted into a higher register.

Our days are melodies made from these notes in endless patterns. We emerge from one octave to the next so gently that we hardly realize the transition.

Thinking about all this, I remembered that table of new adult books with the menacing titles. In the same instant I had a vision of that little face I love, which this morning had looked out with listlessness and discontent at a world outgrown. The adult books with the grim titles and the face had something in common. Her malady had been that she couldn't find anything to do. And this present world whose voice speaks in the dyspeptic books, this weary, jittery,

fagged-out world of the moment . . . it, too, hasn't yet found what it wants ardently to do. They were two unhappy children together, protesting against the growing!

"I'll tell you what's the matter with me," Boo had said. ". . . I'm halfway between."

In the destiny of the race, this world we know is only a half-grown child. At this moment, it cannot find its way back to yesterday, and it is afraid to venture into tomorrow.

Perhaps they both need a kind of mothering. Perhaps this spoiled little world needs to ask its Mother what it had better do. Then she could show it what wonders lie ahead, waiting until it is ready to accept them. There are beautiful freedoms ahead, as unguessed as the armful of books that started Boo's ticking again. Surely we'll find them one by one, as we lay aside the tired inanities.

Drama

Usually when Boo is telling us about some episode in her comic-strip existence, she unconsciously imitates all the characters. She does it so well that I think in panic, What would we do if we found we have an actress on our hands?

Boo herself has no such notion, and I doubt if she realizes that when she's telling about a squirrel she happened to meet in the park, her teeth get bigger, her cheeks bulb out, and her hands become tiny paws holding an invisible nut.

At the beginning of this school year when we were picking our electives, I suggested a course in drama.

"I thought you wanted me to be well educated," she cried in surprise. "Drama isn't education."

"Well, it might teach you to come into a room without everybody thinking the house is on fire, and sitting in a chair like a lady instead of a wad of wet noodles."

"You have to learn lines," she said distastefully.

But the more she thought about it, the more appealing the idea became. "Mostly, I think the kids just horse around with each other."

Then a sobering thought occurred to her. "Suppose they ask me if I have any talent?"

"You could always say no, then count on surprising them."

"They'd soon find out," she said. But once the idea had been mentioned, wild horses couldn't have kept her out of the drama course.

The first couple of weeks were a disappointment. The class took a quick glance at the history of the theatre since the Roman empire. It was sheer swindle; you couldn't tell it from just any ordinary history course.

Then things began looking up. They were put into little teams and given an assignment.

"Guess what? I've got a part to work out!" she said as she burst into the house. "We're supposed to present an old woman being told she can't be on relief."

"What're you . . . the relief?"

“Comedy, I suppose? Very funny,” she said with dignity. “I’m the social worker who asks the questions. Quite a nice part, Miss Thugbugger says.” (That isn’t her name, of course, but nobody between the ages of thirteen and seventeen would pass up such an invitation to improvise.)

We didn’t hear how the drama went, for hot on its heels came an assignment to be “a girl who needs glasses and won’t admit it,” and then “a father showing off his baby,” “a woman accusing a maid of stealing,” and on and on through a nerve-wracking semester until we inevitably reached *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which statistics tell us has been played by every high school in the nation except 672 backward groups, who happen not to have any stage available.

We weren’t alone in the misery, for several of our friends had children also bitten by the drama. I felt especially sorry for my friend Martha Burton, whose child is what my mother used to call, “Less prit than smart.”

Martha had entered her daughter in the course because she thought it would give her confidence. But, instead, it turned out that Cabby was petrified whenever she had to stand up before the class, and couldn’t even get her teeth unclenched. So eventually she became the Props Committee. Martha tried to put the best possible face on that, but I knew she was humiliated.

“Cabby has so much ingenuity! It was simply inevitable that they’d make her rig up the props for their little plays,” Martha said, looking very bright-eyed about it.

The appointment involved a lot of work for everybody in the family except Cabby. When they put on the sketch about Lincoln for the whole student body, Martha had a terrible time getting the items together.

“I’ve ridden all over town trying to borrow a paisley shawl,” she said. “And would you believe it, the people who own one, won’t lend it! I bought some nice copper to hang on the walls . . . *that* I didn’t mind. You can always use copper for *something*. But the dough nearly threw me.”

“The dough, dear?” I murmured, thinking that under the strain Martha had lapsed into slang.

“Bread dough. I couldn’t seem to get a big enough batch so it would look like anything in the large yellow mixing bowl. Finally about four in the morning I threw in three more yeast cakes, and by the time we got up, dough was billowing all over the kitchen.”

My heart ached for her, but I was glad she had so much manual labor that she couldn’t grieve over the fact that Cabby wasn’t being trusted out on the

stage.

Parents were banned from attending that performance, so we never really knew how Boo came out as a shawled neighbor who dropped into the Lincoln cabin to borrow a Bible.

Her review of herself was laconic.

"I was okay," she said.

"I think on the stage they call that 'adequate,' " one of the less sympathetic members of the household said. But the point was lost on Boo, who has probably never read a drama review in her life.

Now the five-finger exercises of ad lib assignments were over, and Miss Thugbugger was bracing herself for the Spring Play.

"Have they given you your part yet?" I asked anxiously.

"We try out next week," Boo said glumly. "I don't think I'll get the female lead, so don't be disappointed."

"I won't be, dear. After all, there have to be secondary parts and good sports to play them."

"Wrong game," Boo said. "Good sportsmanship hasn't anything to do with drama. On the contrary."

She looked positively gaunt during the week of tryouts. "Don't keep asking me," she said quarrelsomely. "I'll tell you when I know for sure."

"I'm just interested," I said meekly.

"Well, don't be."

And then the suspense was over, and we knew. She came home, smugly beaming with pride and relief.

"Guess what?"

"You got the lead! How wonderful!"

"Well, no. Better than that. I'm the Chairman of the Props Committee. My name on the program, and everything."

"But . . . but I thought Cabby did the props."

"Pooh with Cabby. She's only the committee. *I'm* the chairman."

"As talented as Cabby, only more so," I said without bitterness. Then I went and phoned Cabby's mother to find out where we could borrow a paisley

shawl, and how many yeast cakes to put in the bread dough.

Tumpti

Nothing in our house was ever quite the same after Dr. Frank Frederick Ishinara took over. He wanted to do the shopping, and at first, in an exuberance of liberation, I let him. But he was too frugal a shopper. The first week, we endured the austerity, each of us being more than delighted with what the bathroom scales had to say on the subject. But finally, because the cooking, though excellent, was so miniature, we had to speak about the size of the portions.

He looked disgusted. “Everybody too fat,” he said categorically, and we couldn’t very well deny it.

“Everybody eat too much.”

“Yes, I suppose we do,” I conceded meekly. “But we’re all very active people . . . and we’ve fallen into the dreadful habit of enjoying food.”

His little quince-like face did not change its expression in any way, but you could see by his silence that he had a volume of rebuttal he was withholding.

“I think . . . perhaps I’d better do the shopping myself,” I said. “You see, I’ve always done it, and I know the situation.”

“Waste money,” he said laconically. “I get bargains.”

“I’m sure you do,” I said diplomatically. “The fact is, you’re such a *good* cook, we want to give you everything possible to work with.”

“I very bad cook,” he said fiercely. So we let it go at that.

The very first day when I brought home the provisions, I ran into trouble. I brought home lamb chops, one large one for each of us, and one for Frank. He counted them and then looked disgustedly at me. “Who other chop intended to be devoured by?”

“Why . . . by you, of course.”

He let one of his rare expressions nearly demolish his face. Then he said with dignity, “Dr. Ishinara would not eat such thing.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. What would you like?”

“I provide own food,” he said with dignity. “I cook nice for me. Lice!” My horror at his diet was dispelled in a moment, when I recalled his difficulties with *r*'s and *l*'s.

We soon took to calling him by a pet name. Frank just didn't seem to fit, and of course that was because it wasn't really his name. One of the Oriental's first and easiest concessions when he comes to America, is to take on a good solid American name. Frank, who never did things by half, had taken on two.

But we called him Tumptigubben, which is what we seemed to remember Swedish children call the good fairies that get all the boring tasks done when nobody is around. At first we called him Tumptigubben behind his back. But finally the name slipped out, and seemed to please him, so from then on we called him Tumpti.

In his cooking he could make absolutely anything, from ingenious canapes, which our friends called "landscapes on toast," to huge towering decorated cakes. Often he would create a birthday cake, at a time when none of us could possibly claim an anniversary. On these masterpieces he would print in Gauguin pink or neon blue frosting "Hapy Birsday, dear House." Or even "Hapy nineteen March."

Once, wanting to please him, I suggested he cook us something out of the recipe book he had sired.

"Those recipes no good," he said, grinning. "I write for show. Help get good jobs."

He couldn't bear to see any extravagance around the premises. One Friday morning, after his Thursday off, we found our table decorated with stiff paper flowers.

"I make," he said. "Real flowers waste of money."

Appalled though we were, we had them on the breakfast table for months. The eye is, alas, a great peacemaker; what can't be cured it finally renders invisible. And besides, I think all of us understood that what the paper flowers lacked in aesthetic value, they more than made up in human meaning.

Another Friday morning we found at each place when we came down to breakfast, a hard, sticky sweet roll. Made, I should think, of chipped isinglass held together by sweetened varnish.

"I bring gift," Tumpti said demurely.

We bit into the rolls with gusto, and tried not to let the taste seep through to our expressions. Each of us cried appreciatively, and Tumpti stood there with his eyes almost lost in wrinkles of delight. We overdid our enjoyment, however, for every Friday morning after that we sat down to some indescribably horrific piece of pastry brought from First and San Pedro Streets.

We became very skillful in secreting the gifts about our persons, wrapped in handkerchiefs. Once I still had mine in my sweater pocket when I took my afternoon walk. I crumbled it to offer to some sparrows who tried it and indignantly refused it, not even having the politeness to secrete the crumbs about *their* persons. I imagine these delicacies were a special breed put out by a cynical bakery especially for cooks to offer Occidentals on Friday mornings.

I'm sure Tumpti must have had acrobats in his ancestry. Of all his household tasks he most enjoyed washing windows, and our panes were scrubbed thin. It was a terrifying spectacle to watch, for he would stand on the narrow window sills with his little feet turned out in a ballet position, while he wielded the huge screens as if they were balancing parasols. The only way you could get through the nerve-wracking performance without raising your blood pressure, was to anticipate when a window washing yen was about to strike, and then arrange to be out of the house.

The larger the job, the more he seemed to enjoy it. He'd romp around the rooms with our big vacuum cleaner like a child playing hobbyhorse. We always said that if some day he turned up missing, we'd look for him first in the vacuum cleaner's dustbag.

The first time he cleaned the living room, I went down to explain that when the time came to move the huge divan, in case he insisted upon sweeping behind it (which no one ever had attempted before), we'd borrow the neighbor's houseman to help move it.

But the huge divan, which looked like a recumbent elephant and must have weighed as much, was already standing in the middle of the floor. He, all eighty-nine pounds of him, was crouched behind it, scratching its back with a whisk broom.

"But . . . how on earth . . . ?" I gasped.

He looked at me and grinned.

"Jujitsu," he said.

If You Want To Be Boss

Children are wholesomely objective about their own faults. They wear their little selves turned inside out; the patches and seams have no privacy.

Unless they've been shamed into self-consciousness about their shortcomings, they don't defend them with alibis and explanations. To begin with, they don't consider faults are permanent. After all, they live in a state of constant development from day to day. Their attitude seems to say, "I started out from scratch with nothing much to my credit, and I worked up this far. Probably keep going, making improvements along the way."

When you talk to a four-year-old, and you compare what you've accomplished by way of self-improvement in the last four years, you're apt to blush.

Since children consider their shortcomings neither permanent nor fatal, they aren't particularly embarrassed about them. If adults had the same expectation about reforming themselves, the race might really get somewhere!

A chubby child I know came home from school and said without chagrin, "No matter if I give other children my cupcake, they'd rather not eat their lunch with me."

"Why do you suppose that is?" her mother asked, trying to be as tactfully casual as possible, so her child's feelings wouldn't be bruised.

But the little girl was cheerfully impersonal about the whole situation.

"Well, I suppose they think I'm bossy," she said.

"And are you?"

"Yep," she said, taking a lollipop out of her mouth to accommodate a wide grin.

"Planning to do anything about it?" her mother asked.

She thought a minute, still grinning. "Yep," she said. "Guess I'll have to get over it. You can't boss people around if they won't play with you."

A Spy's-Eye View

If there's any apple polishing these days, nobody could accuse the teenagers of doing it. Sometimes parents are guilty, however. Me, for instance. You see, I like teachers, and I can't get over a feeling of respect persisting from my own childhood. I think teachers probably know everything. When they talk to me as an equal, I feel positively giddy.

So when my friend Miss Getterson casually said I could attend the Student Government assembly meeting if I wanted to, I was pretty set up about it.

But Boo was appalled at the idea.

"I hope nobody would suspect you belonged in *my* family," she said bluntly.

"I don't expect to disgrace either you or myself," I couldn't help sounding haughty.

"Sit somewhere in the back where people won't wonder how you happened to be there."

"You needn't feel any responsibility. I'm Miss Getterson's guest."

"And if we should run into each other," she said truculently, "I hope you don't try to speak to me or anything."

"Perish the perish," I said. "If I see you, I'll duck under a seat."

"The meeting's not for outsiders, anyway," she said gruffly. "I can't imagine what you'll find interesting."

"Not the welcome, certainly," I said, cheerfully offended.

"And for pity's sake, don't try to dress up," she said, gazing into a new depth of horror. "Wear something inconspicuous."

"I was thinking of wearing a sheet, with two holes cut in it for eyes." This, naturally, she ignored.

"Thank goodness, you're an un-celebrity. We have some poor kids whose parents are celebrities," she said. "Everybody feels awfully sorry for them when their parents insist on showing up."

"How do *they* dress?"

"The really important ones try to look unimportant. Usually they wear old

sports clothes. But sometimes the ones who aren't important enough to *try* to look unimportant dress the same way. That's very offensive."

I could see that no parent could possibly do the right thing at Beverly Hills High, so I just went as I was. There was one other parent present, and I guess she was pretty important, because she had on a beauty operator's white uniform. But she gave herself away completely, for she had the uniform under her nice mink coat. She and I tried not to meet each other's eye, so I knew we'd had the same briefing, and we both were trying to be invisible.

The meeting was conducted by a tall toothsome lad who was the President of the Student Council. His Board also sat on the platform, nice-looking youngsters full of confidence. They all spoke without frills, using a kind of basic English without too much regard for the hair-splitting meanings of words. The idea was what mattered, and the words lay wherever they fell.

The President, a bland staccato youngster . . . a Rotarian in the bud, if I ever saw one, began by saying, "Once a week we more or less sit down and think things over. Good idea sometimes."

Since nobody contradicted that startling discovery, he said, "So we decided to let you all attend our regular weekly meeting. Thought we'd discuss some common problems. Any question, you can ask at the five minutes after what we have to say is finished. Anything we haven't covered, that is."

You could see he had perfect confidence that they would cover all the common problems so adequately that nothing would be left to question. Now he called on one of his colleagues, a redheaded giant who stood up and jammed his knuckles in his Levi pockets. He explained what public opinion is, and what kind of weapon it can be.

"If everybody thinks a thing is so, then you'd better get on the beam and agree," he said menacingly.

When something real difficult faced the Board, they handled it in a radical way. "When we've got something real serious to discuss, we ask the faculty to please leave the room. That way we can be democratic."

A girl, tall and smooth, was then called upon. Without preamble, she touched on what was evidently a controversial subject.

"Clothes are a private matter," she said. "But they shouldn't be inconspicuous. Real personality can rise above clothes. But the right clothes give you confidence. If people don't see your clothes, you feel insecure."

In the twenty minutes allotted to the entire discussion, these subjects were

tossed into the air, to land wherever they might take root: going steady; owning a car; getting your family to let you have a telephone listed in your name; being decent to kids from other schools when their teams clashed with ours in our gymnasium; not throwing Good Humor sticks all over the parking lot; nobody booing next week when the annual Faculty Talent Show was going to be given. “Remember they’re human, too,” a serious-faced boy said. “Maybe that could be our motto in regard to teachers.”

Nobody mentioned study in any form. They seemed to have banished that idea from the curriculum; anyway it wasn’t a common problem.

During the five-minute discussion period, a bright-eyed lad stood up on the front row. “I’m innerested in getting some of you guys to volunteer as lunchroom waiters,” he shouted belligerently.

“The pay depends on how big you can make it. You get your lunch . . . as much as you can eat.”

A wave of nose-holding swept over the audience, but the recruiting officer went on valiantly. “Seriously now,” he said quite fiercely. “About the best thing I’ve learned at good ole Beverly Hills High is how to carry seven bowls of soup on one tray. All a matter of confidence.”

If I picked up one gem from the meeting, it was the need for confidence. I crept out as invisibly as possible, knowing my own education had been cripplingly deficient. For you never saw anybody slink out with less confidence.

The Rich People

When I was a child there was one most conspicuous fact about our family. But I never discovered it until I was grown up and could compare our life and our house with what I saw all around me.

The fact was that we were what is commonly called “poor people.” I know now that the reason this conspicuous fact was never fully grasped by us was my mother. So valiantly did she emphasize our riches that we never really found we were poor until long after the condition had passed.

And by that time I never could say to myself, “We used to be poor,” because whenever I remembered our circumstances such a wealth of happiness and adventure and comfort came flooding into my heart that I could only stand silent, wishing all families were as rich as we had been.

My mother, to begin with, was born with a purseful of fun in her mind. She could make a game of anything that had to be done. She had the grace of accepting necessities so they felt like choices. Her eager little face always leaps into my mind when I read that verse in Deuteronomy which says, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life.” She chose the “life” of enjoying what we had, instead of concentrating on the “death” of what we lacked. We never grieved over what we couldn’t have; we just had something else.

We walked miles sometimes to save a five-cent carfare. But our mother taught us the joy of walking, so that economizing seemed never the reason we walked.

Drudgery didn’t exist for her, yet when I remember all the “work” which flowed through her small hands, I cannot see how one woman could have accomplished it. She would tackle anything, no matter how strange a task it was, nor how large it appeared. “We’ll just pitch in,” she’d say. And pitch in we did.

She and my father bought a big old house when we were very small. It had to be a large house, because our only way of paying for it was to convert half of it into an apartment to be rented . . . the best half, of course. Knowing how to make the “best” of anything, we kept the darkest part, and my mother brought make-believe sunshine into it with yellow wallpaper, and white paint and ruffled organdy.

The actual paper hanging was a picnic for all of us. We hired one room

done, so we could all find out how trained paper-hangers tackle their work. Then we set to. Each of us had a dinner pail we carried to our work just as the professionals had carried theirs. At noon we sat on the floor with our backs against the wall and swapped shop-talk. My mother's fables of big paper-hanging and paint jobs she had done in her time were the tallest tales of all. Her audacious imagination could scamper over any subject like a buffooning monkey.

She did everything in an original way, as if it never had been done before. I came home from school unexpectedly one morning and found her washing dishes with her best hat on.

"Just felt bored with carpet sweeping and dusting," she confessed airily. "This is to remind me that if I hurry up and get finished, I can go someplace and see sights."

Sometimes when we sat down to a meal, we found we were lunching at the Martha Washington Tea Shoppe, or the Eatum Up Lunch Counter. There would be humorous or absurdly "dainty" menu cards, listing all kinds of diverting foods. It wasn't until years later that I realized these menus appeared when our budget was particularly narrow-minded. My mother never abandoned anything to dullness and disappointment; she could dress up anything with what she had in herself.

She was a proper-looking little woman, with demure curls and a small voice. She admired propriety above all outward graces. But at home she had a mischievous talent for make-believe which never left anything as she found it. She never told a story without outrageous impersonations. Her very verbs came to life and strutted behind footlights. Yet the drama of simple neighborhood "doings" had no malice, for she could not bear to hurt anyone . . . not even with laughter. I remember once hearing her say, "It must hurt God's feelings when we laugh at each other."

Her days were filled with housework and canning and repairing and contriving, yet she always found time for countless little deeds of charity and neighborliness. "Everybody must share whatever they have. Some people can just give money, but we can give our time," she used to say proudly. There was no disparaging of either gift, for both offerings were important and valuable. Some people have money; perhaps the more fortunate have time.

Sometimes we'd come running back from school and find her not at home. There would be some kind of note pinned on our back door, suggesting we "start dinner," but suggesting it in some way that amused us. I remember one note, typewritten like a classified advertisement, which said:

Help Wanted: Two girls with exceptional ability to set table, pare potatoes, wash lettuce, slice tomatoes, open canned corn, and light oven with meatloaf inside. Lowest wages and highest praises.

The high board fence of "things we cannot possibly afford" could have hemmed us in on all sides, and made us all sorry for ourselves, and poor. But it never did, because my mother knew that what is within the heart is more real than anything which can be bought and added to the outside of living.

Yet, if there was some luxury that one of us craved unbearably, my mother usually found a way to manage it. She had a blithe way of snubbing necessities when she wanted to, in favor of luxuries. Once when I was about fourteen, there was a hat which I thought I couldn't live without. Instead of trying to persuade me that it was only a silly whim, she treated it as seriously as I did.

"You think you want it so much you'll remember it when you're a grown woman?" she asked me. I knew I never would be the same if I couldn't have that hat.

"All right, my darling. You'll have it," she said.

"But how?"

"Never mind how," she said, setting her lips firmly. "We'll give up butter and eat gravy for a few weeks. The butter would just blur into oblivion, but if you really love the hat that much, it will live with you as long as you live." It has, too.

It has been many years since I saw that merry little blue-eyed face . . . merry until the very last minute of her life. When we lost her quite suddenly, I thought the window through which I looked into heaven had been closed forever.

We were going to be apart now, and there would not even be letters. Then a curious thing happened to me. Something seemed to lay a gentle hand on my mind, and without words Something seemed to tell me that the letters would not stop at all, if I would only receive them. They would come to me somehow, but I would have to look for them and recognize them, for they would be wearing disguises. They would borrow all sorts of shapes to say themselves to me. I could not know how they would come, and my grief at first was too deep to look above itself. But they waited for me to look.

I find them now over and over in the most unexpected places. I find them in something a stranger says to me with a quick merry lift of laughter; I find them sometimes in my own thoughts. I may be cogitating on some subject and

suddenly there will flash across my mind a bright parenthesis, a tucked-in comment which I recognize.

Once a year we in America celebrate Mother's Day. Those whose mothers are still within touching distance, give flowers. The rest of us who have had to learn something of this I have tried to say, need no flowers nor any other stumbling symbols. For nothing which has helped make our heart the living thing it is, can ever be lost.

The having and then the not-having have left a knowledge that is bigger than symbols, and closer than breath.

Line Busy

The people in my house always think if you're talking on the telephone it is their chance to engage your other ear, without your being able to talk back.

Last night I was having a protracted telephone conversation, so Boo came in and sat on the floor in the direct line of my vision.

"Who're you talking to?"

I mouthed, "Relations."

She said, "We had a talk about relations in our Good Citizenship Club."

I let my eyebrows go up in an *accent circonflexe* to indicate interest.

"Premarital relations," she said. "Comes from the Latin. 'Pre' is a prefix meaning before . . . so this was about relations before marriage. Dr. Hunt is against 'em."

I became more circumflex, and let my free hand scuffle over the mouthpiece, so our kinfolks wouldn't hear anything to upset them.

"Seems funny to me," Boo said. "I assume the premarital relations are the ones you had before you acquired in-laws. Why should Dr. Hunt think in-laws are more desirable than the relations you were born with? Very puzzling."

"Don't puzzle," I said. "I'll explain it to you later."

"When?"

"Tomorrow, God willing."

The Sooplize

If he hadn't been undeniably the best cook on earth, we couldn't have put up with the suspense, surprise, and general emotionalism of Tumpti's cooking. Scarcely ever was a meal a routine matter, negotiated without shock of some kind. But as one of us said in defense of him, "Well, at least he shocks you *upward*."

Also he talked to himself. And not in any pleasant amiable dialogue, as one might expect between congenial comrades. He argued with himself, sometimes in crackling Japanese, and even more terrifying, in gunfire English. The part of him that did the bullying had the other meeker part completely cowed. But occasionally there was answering back.

With us he was usually pleasantness incarnate. Obviously he liked us better than he liked himself. And we intended to keep it that way, if we possibly could.

That wasn't too difficult. We had a method for getting along fine; when we inadvertently proposed something he didn't want, he tolerantly ignored the proposal.

"No good," he'd say cheerfully. "I show you how I do it." So we always came to a compromise by having it his way.

Sometimes I used to worry about his food. Every five or six days he would cook up enough for a week of his meager rations. As he had promised in the beginning, it would always be lice in some form or other. The quantity would be about enough for two normal people to eat at a sitting.

When I timidly inquired if he were getting enough to eat, he got quite mad. "You want me fat! Everybody too fat. I stay with health."

He had his own time for doing chores, and nothing could divert him from his private schedule. For instance, on Wednesday morning he put all of his Tuesday's clothes in the washing machine, and on Thursday morning Wednesday's aprons, white trousers, and shirt had to be washed, and so on through the week. Our washing machine is not one of the silent varieties you see on TV when you want to see a Spectacular. Ours rumbles and quivers and the whole house vibrates in harmony with it. Consequently when you woke up at our house, your first thought was that you were on a seagoing vessel. But it was only Tumpti taking care of his daily cleanth.

His private cooking he always did when he was in the grip of the whim. Usually it would be on the rare occasions when I had asked him to put together a tea tray, and bring it into the living room for guests. Since he usually enlivened the lice with raw fish, this wasn't the best moment for concocting his own fare.

In many ways he had a positive genius for picking an inconvenient time for doing everything. But we loved him so much, and we were so aware of his incomparable virtues, that we naturally made the quiet best of it all.

But I did think that the day he was preparing a big buffet for twenty-five people (the hungriest people imaginable, too, this being a writers' club) was hardly the time for him to cook up one of his own private recipes.

The buffet, in fact, had been his idea from the beginning.

"Not enough company," he had grumbled. "House too quiet. I go someplace else."

"Why, we've thought . . ." I said apologetically.

"You invite. I make beeg buffet supper. Turkey, ham, cleamed potatoes. Stuff for party." He danced on his little feet like a boxer, sparring in the air to indicate the size of his preparations.

He kept at me, too, until I set the date and called up the guests. Whenever I brought up the subject of the menu, he was indignant. "I fix. Nobody bother. You bring in turkey . . . twenty pounds. Also big ham. Maybe oysters, sweet potatoes. I make chelly pie. I borrow big coffeepot next door."

"I'll buy a big coffeepot," I said quickly, feeling sure that borrowing isn't done in Beverly Hills.

"Waste money. I already arrange," he said haughtily. "I rend cook next door two thlee things." His face looked greased with craftiness.

We insisted on eating our lunch out on the day of the buffet. For one look in the kitchen told us that when big events are marching, small episodes must retreat.

That's why it was such a ridiculous moment for him to decide to cook up his private "lice." Not just the little supply for a week, either, but a huge quantity, enough to see him through a month.

"What's this?" I asked innocently, as if I didn't know when I saw the kettle boiling.

"My lice," he said indignantly, just daring me to comment, for or against.

So I said in a most conciliatory voice, “Well, one thing about a buffet supper. It really doesn’t matter whether or not it’s served exactly on time. Don’t you worry about it.”

“Wully? I don’t wully.” He wagged his little head cheerfully, and I could see that in his mind worry is an unadmirable Occidental pursuit holding no temptations for him.

But when I told the family about his picking today to cook for himself, they weren’t too indulgent.

“I think he just tries to see how annoying he can be. Why couldn’t he eat a few slivers of turkey and ham? It wouldn’t kill him.”

“He rikes his lice,” I said. “And this is a free country. That’s why he’s lived here for fifty years.” But privately I thought there was a point in the rare criticism.

We were all prepared to have the buffet appear late, like a prima donna. But on the dot of seven, Tumpti came to the door of the living room, stiff and sparkling in fresh white.

“Buffet leddy,” he said, faultlessly.

And there it was, all present and accounted for . . . the turkey, its breast rippling into snowy slices, as regular as the pages of a new-opened book . . . the ham pink-petaled and luscious with a garland of spiced crabapples ringing the platter, sweet potatoes, creamed potatoes, broccoli with flawless hollandaise, fruits in a salad which looked like a travel folder for the Garden of Eden . . . rolls under wraps . . . And then my eye stumbled and stopped. For in the very center of the buffet. . . the *pièce de résistance*, supported by the entire caste of lesser viands . . . was a mystery performer.

“What on earth is that?” I whispered in horror to Tumpti, standing by with eager tiny hands clasped in pride under a fatuously enthralled face.

“That *lice*,” he whispered back. “Ve’y good. I fix for sooplize.”

He had prepared an enormous flat pan of it . . . so huge that he had had to buy it somewhere out of his own salary (or maybe the neighbors on the *other* side were the owners?)

Everyone was dipping into it, and its hidden goodies were being turned up to view. Tiny shrimps, almonds, mushrooms . . . heaven knows what. But principally lice.

Everybody came back and asked for more of it. And the entrepreneur

produced another immense panful, just as good as the first. Everyone ate until the last grain and morsel was gone, and the rest of the buffet just sat there looking mortified.

Every time our paths crossed, he said, “I sooplize you!” His face was the happiest one in the room. The writers had been invited, but Tumpti was the honored guest.

So now day after day the family, badly outnumbered, has been working away on an ole twenty-pound turkey, and a ham what am, which looks as if it will continue am-ing forever.

Apple Without Newton

If you *must* see apples growing, you have to find a good excuse to leave California. So, when we could bear it no longer, we went back to New England. On business.

We sat on a sunny stone wall under an applesauce tree, and we ate apples, loving autumn in the heart. The perfume of apples was in the air, and occasionally we heard the solid drumbeat of one falling in the orchard, without a Newton to marvel. Naturally we talked about apples as we munched . . . that first one of Eve's, the brave one of William Tell, the ones Robert Frost picked in his poem. We recited the homely names of strains we like best . . . Russets, Grimes Golden, Baldwins, and Macintoshes. Those of us who preferred the crisp and tart lined up against the mealy and sweet.

We tossed the cores over our shoulders, then bit into another apple and opened the pearly pockets and saw the seeds. We said to ourselves, "Nobody . . . no human eye . . . has ever seen this seed before!"

We held the seed in our hand, polished as mahogany and warm as life itself, and we thought, This is one of the wonders of the universe. I can let it become nothing, in the crack of this stone wall. Or I can plant it and someday there will be another tree for friends to sit beneath on some distant Saturday morning.

Somebody said lazily, "An apple's a wonderful thing. I was just thinking."

"So was I," the rest of us admitted.

"No matter where you happen to eat an apple, it always reminds you of home," somebody said.

Then I remembered the American apple, and the Polish schoolmaster with whom I ate it.

This was long ago when I was a young student coming back to America after a fine holiday. I boarded the ship from a tender at Southampton, just before midnight. There was that carefree excitement you always feel when you get on a ship, waiting in the ocean for you to come and possess it. I ran fore and aft, exploring; I leaned on the rail and watched the lights rocking in the water, and the luggage coming on board. It was all exciting and fun, as if we were a large family of children moving into a new house.

I kept bumping into a dark-eyed little man, more delighted even than I, and

more eager to see everything at once. He kept courteously apologizing and asking me questions, and I realized he had a new vocabulary of wobbly English he wanted to try out on somebody.

So we talked. We talked as if there never would be another night for talking. And this was how he actually felt, it developed, for he belonged in Third, and this was the only time he could have the run of the ship.

He was a teacher in a boys' school in Warsaw, and he had been saving his money for ten years to visit America. He wanted to see everything, but particularly the place where Washington crossed the Delaware, which his boys liked to hear about. He had five weeks to spend . . . and nearly $40.

"But I do not care to eat much," he said hastily. "I want only to see."

We talked and talked. Sometimes we came to the high wall of an unfamiliar word and could not climb over it to each other. He wanted to know about schools, about little boys' camps, about free concerts for children. He wanted to know how we teach reading, and what gift his wife would most enjoy from America. He wanted to have his picture taken, and he wanted to see a cafeteria.

Then he decided to share something with me. "Now you must wait here, and I shall bring up something from below. A gift given to me because I am going to America."

He disappeared, and I waited a long time, sleepy now, but not daring to be so rude as to leave when this was his only night.

He came back at last, his face pink from the long plunge down to Third. "Look . . . here it is," he said almost in awe. "An American apple." He put it gently in my hands, a very weary apple from long being more than fruit to this man and his schoolboys. I could see it was a tangible pledge, a hostage from a dream at last come true.

"We shall eat it together, and you will tell me if it tastes like all American apples," he said. Then he held it up for one last admiring look, and cut it in half.

He bit into it, and silently tested the taste. Then he nodded with satisfaction. Yes, America was going to be all that he had hoped for.

He was hilarious with enjoyment. He smacked his lips and snapped his eyes, and I, too, ate as lustily.

We tossed the halved core into the Atlantic darkness, and shared a moment's silence.

“Well,” he said ceremoniously. “Now I have eaten an American apple. It is delectable. But it eats too fluently.”

I had not thought of the Polish schoolmaster for years. What is he doing now, behind the iron curtain? Whatever he is doing, I know an American apple stays fresh and sweet in his memory.

Mushrooms and Metaphors

When I go back to New England, I tell my friends I am visiting *them*. But actually I am homesick for the woods. Not the cathedral forests of the Northwest, or the open unreticent groves of eucalyptus and palms; what I long for are the damp secretive little woods that come to your very door-yard, if you live in the suburbs, to eat out of your hand. The intimate small woods straggling thinly over the landscape . . . the shadbush and ferns, the oaks that keep their pink crackling leaves through much of the winter . . . these are what I love, and I have to find excuses for keeping assignation with them.

Like going out with neighbors to look for mushrooms, when I knew I should stay in the house and get a little work done. But there are ways of getting around getting work done and I am familiar with most of them.

For instance one says to oneself, “After all it isn’t every day two officers of the New England Mycological Society invite you to gather specimen mushrooms. You would learn something new . . . that’s your job, isn’t it . . . learning new things, seeing new sights, turning up new figures of speech?”

As you button up the sweater, you think complacently, You wouldn’t be just amusing yourself. You wouldn’t even be out looking for mushrooms to *eat* . . . it’s a fresh new metaphor you’d be hunting.

I’ve chased wild metaphors many a time; I know their trails lead into engaging bypaths, for they are untamable creatures, indigenous to no restricted climate but found in any. They cannot be caught with trap or cage; they are like leprechauns whom to look at is not to see. Metaphors, too, must be looked at out of the corner of the mind, so to speak. The art of misapplication rules them. Talking about one subject, they instruct about another. They are puns in picture form.

Metaphors are the shadow which clarifies substance. They are tiny mirrors into which imagination may look and see . . . itself. For the more you know, the more you see in a metaphor; indeed in simile it is knowing which becomes seeing.

Metaphors are as tactful as they are informative, for if you know nothing at all about the subject, you are not offended or rebuked, because they offer your eye an agreeable still life, valuable for itself. Metaphors are the diplomats of rhetoric; they lead you urbanely to the brink, but it is you who states some unique conclusion to your own discovering self. There is nothing more

satisfying than finding a provocative metaphor. (Unless it be the finding of a clump of gnomish mushrooms hunched at the foot of a chestnut stump!)

Trying to explain, one often fumbles . . . then some little picture comes nimbly to the hand and one picks it up surely like a flashlight. With its tiny, incisive ray, a good simile can illumine almost any elusive meaning. Where reason stumbles, imagination flies unfettered. One is talking about desultory reading with no program or destination . . . book after book, each all right but unassociated . . . then one has it. "Why!" you say delightedly, "it's like sewing a long seam with no knot in the end of the thread!"

Or you try to tell someone about the pleasure of keeping a journal. "But there are so many books already written," one is told. You stammer witlessly for rebuttal, then your friend the metaphor helps you.

"Of course . . . but it is the difference between planting even a windowbox of our own, and walking through the public's botanical gardens!"

Our afternoon was too full of mushrooms to think about the metaphors. There was too much beauty splashed across the sky, too many impressive Latin names bandied about . . . too many enchanted dwarfs scampering through the leaves to be transfixed into mushrooms when you pounced. . . .

We came home with baskets bulging. Then, within sight of the house I remembered on what pretext I had come out. Here we were laden with mushrooms, both edible and specimen . . . but quite quite empty of metaphor.

Well, the next best thing, then, is to learn more about mushrooms. You never know when knowledge will come in handy.

"What I don't understand," you say earnestly, "is how these little chaps grow. Are they root, branch, or flower? And where is the rest of them?"

"They're flowers," the six-foot-tall mycologist explains. "They spring from an underground plant, a white thread-like mycelium. It grows along quite unseen, under the ground, until it is ready to put out its blossoms. . . ."

"Mycelium," you repeat, and a glow of joy comes over you. "Just the way thought grows along, unsuspected and unseen until it shows itself above the surface in some sudden action. . . ."

You are delighted beyond words now. "And how in the world have historians . . . or dramatists . . . how have poets . . . or lovers . . . or even economists . . . how has *anyone* ever got along without that wonderful metaphor? Mycelium!"

This is why you went to the woods; *this* is what you were seeking under the

leaves, beside the tree stumps. You have forgotten the mushrooms now. Let ’em be broiled and served on toast! What you have found was prophesied in the book of Proverbs: *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver*.

Let the mushrooms be eaten; *this* shall be framed and hung upon a page.

The Prom

Part of the agony was that such an unimportant matter could loom so tragically mountainous. It rolled up and hit us without any warning; one day we were happy and carefree, and the next day our house was tense with the fact.

She herself had announced the awful absence bluntly. “Looks like I’m not going,” she had blurted out suddenly.

“Going where?”

“Why to the Prom, of course.”

“Why not?” I asked, not sensing the significance.

“Nobody’s invited me.”

I recovered instantly from the stark awfulness, and said as brightly as possible. “Oh, it’s early yet. Give ’em time.”

“Other people’ve been asked.”

“Well, don’t worry about it,” I said.

“Who’s worrying?” she growled.

“You have plenty of time for proms . . . years and years of them.”

“Eeek!” she said as if I were promising years and years of toothache.

After that, she didn’t mention it again. And that’s what really worried me. It is painful to see anxiety treated in a mature way by your child; it means that from now on anxiety will be accepted as a normal part of existence. No longer will disappointment be met with incredulity and frankness. Grief will now be compounded with the hateful germ of shame. It will go underground, as it has long ago gone in adult make-up, and not be the wholesome lying-on-the-floor-and-screaming indignity.

I, of course, gave it my most expert worrying. For the first time, I felt completely helpless to deflect a blow which I saw whizzing like a comet toward Boo’s precious peace and happiness. I kept telling myself it was trivial and unimportant but of course I couldn’t deceive myself. I knew that probably nothing we’d had to face in the last fifteen years was as ghastly in importance.

I wondered how many houses in our neighborhood were quaking with this agony. Did they dare confess it? Did anybody try to handle it in an open and

frank way? I saw in my mind an efficient pair of mothers making a deal. “Listen, Grace . . . your George had better ask Patricia to the prom. Then later I’ll have him down to our beach house.” I winnowed through my list of friends who had sons, but there were no Graces among them. And if there had been, I couldn’t have baldly bargained. We just don’t do things like that in my family. But even more important, Boo would never forgive me for trying.

So we all just suffered in gallant silence. I thought that Boo looked strained and pale; her voice, valiantly chirpy with pride and anxiety, seemed to be getting higher and tighter, as if it would suddenly break in a shower of sparks.

Once I dared say, “To tell you the truth” (not telling the truth at all), “I’m not sure I would allow you to go to the prom. I think you’re too young.”

“I’ve aged lately,” she said, and tried to grin, but didn’t manage it any better than I had managed my wobbly stand.

The days went on and other girls got bids. We knew because sometimes Boo burst into the house and said, with bright-eyed cheerfulness, “Oh, I’m so happy for Joan. And *she’s* even got braces on her teeth.”

We thought of making a festive family jaunt to San Francisco, on the week end of the prom.

“What would we do in ole San Francisco?” Boo asked gloomily.

“Have fun, natch.”

“Doing what? Sightseeing, I suppose.”

“I know people up there. My old classmate Ernestine you’ve heard me speak of.”

“The one with the son,” she said accusingly, laying bare my shameful maneuvering.

“We’d take up formals. I’d get a new one for me. And of course your *first* one. Then we’d have them, just in case.”

“In case what?” she asked with dark sullenness.

“Why . . . in case anything came up.”

“I don’t want a formal,” she said bitterly. “I doubt if I’m ever going to want one. I hate the sight of ’em. Silly sentimental net and stuff . . . practically announcing to the world you’re interested in romance or something. Who’s interested in romance, for golly’s sake?”

So I dropped the idea of San Francisco, seeing it would be only a dismal

public confession of failure on the home ground.

We knew there was no use trying to spare ourselves; we would just have to stand upon dignity and take what humiliatingly came . . . or didn't come, to be more accurate.

I considered every fantastic possibility, and rejected them all. I thought of writing a letter to our Senator, suggesting we get a bill through the legislature prohibiting proms for schoolchildren until they had reached the age of consent. This cruel situation should be stopped by law. If not by law, then by the P.T.A.

Whereas before we had had to drive her into exile for homework, now every evening Boo retired voluntarily to her room and shut the door. She didn't even care whether or not she came out to answer the telephone, and that should give you an idea how defeated and dispirited she was.

And then came a telephone call from a furry eager voice which I couldn't recognize. It said, all respectfulness, "May I please speak to Boo?"

My heart suddenly began galloping, and I said, "Why certainly. Will you wait until I go and call her?" as if I thought he might be willing to raise his voice and shout without benefit of Alexander Graham Bell.

"I'll wait," he said, sounding as if his own heart might be cantering a bit.

I ran upstairs instead of screaming, as was my impulse. "Someone on the phone," I gasped, falling through her door.

"Who?"

"I forgot to ask," I said, and kept myself from crying hysterically, *It's a boy*. But she could read it as plainly in my face as if I were passing out cigars in a comic strip.

She went down the stairs at a sedate slink, not like her usual catapult. Obviously she was trying to tell herself, as I was, that it was *nothing*.

She said tentatively, "Hello?" and then there was a long dark silence. I thought the child had fainted. Then a dead syllable floated up to me where I was shivering over the banisters.

"Yes," she said, and her voice sounded hacked out of wood. I couldn't help making up a brilliant sentence that she could have said, but she wasn't telepathic enough to read my mind. So she said, "Yes," again, and after a wide desert of silence, she muttered, "You're welcome," and I heard her putting the phone back in its cradle.

I bounded down the stairs, trying not to look eager.

She said crossly, “What’s everybody excited about?”

“Nobody’s excited, dear,” I lied. She stamped past me with her fists jammed into the pockets of her bathrobe. Her hair, put up in pin curls, added nothing to her winsomeness, except as touching confession that hope springs eternal.

Now the whole family had massed, waiting to be told. At the top of the stairs she didn’t even turn around and look down at us, for she probably knew she would see us stripped of all decent decorum. Over her shoulder she said dully, “That was Winthrop Rawes. He’s in my Probs class. He wanted to ask was the assignment what he thought it was. It was.”

I gripped the banister weakly. “Maybe you hung up . . . too quick,” I said in what was unintentionally a little whimper.

“Too quick for what?” she exploded. Then she began to cry. We stood congealed with agony and helplessness. “I don’t see why a person can’t have any privacy in her own house,” she said. “You’d think my business was a public issue. I’m human, like anybody else. All I want is a little *privacy* . . .” That wasn’t what she wanted by any means; it wasn’t what any of us wanted. But it was as good a word as any to describe our indescribable misery.

Nail Broth

My father loves an old story from the folklore of Sweden. His mother told it to him, and he told it to me scores of times when I was a little girl. I liked it then just as a fairy tale. But since I have grown up I like it even more. When I have watched people react to each other, giving or withholding, I sometimes remember the old story and it seems to me a great parable of human relationship.

I hope you are not too far away from story days to listen to it, the way my father tells it:

"One cold twilight," he says, "a merry wayfarer came through the forest, and there on the edge of the woods he found a little cabin. A single stingy candle was squinting in the window, and a raveling of smoke blew up from the chimney. He knocked on the door, and in a few minutes it was opened a suspicious crack. A mean and meager old face peered out, and a voice, just waiting for a quarrel, said, 'What's your business, tramp?'

" 'I'm not a tramp, grandmother. I'm a human far from my home.'

" 'What's that to me?' the old woman grumbled.

" 'Well, I hoped I might sleep the night on your kitchen floor, grandmother.'

" 'I guessed as much,' she said sourly, not opening the door any farther. 'Why should I share my home with a stranger when I haven't enough for myself?'

" 'Not enough for yourself!' he cried with all sympathy. 'And you such an old woman, too!'

"Her lip trembled with self-pity, but she still didn't open the door. 'I'm about to go to bed without supper,' she said. 'So what chance have you of being fed from my cupboard?'

" 'Without supper!' he cried. 'Oh, you poor dear thing. In that case I must come in and share what I have with you.'

" 'A likely notion that *you* would have anything to share,' she said crossly. But her curiosity was sitting up and looking around greedily.

" 'All of us have more than we realize, grandmother,' he said gently. 'And we can always multiply, if we start with what we have and make something of

that.’

“She found herself, in spite of herself, opening the door then. But he didn’t come in until she curtly motioned with her head. Then he stepped in and glanced around the room with pleasure, admiring everything, so that the old woman herself looked around in surprise at her simple possessions.

“Then she became cautious again. ‘What’s all that talk about sharing, I’d like to know?’ she said crossly.

“ ‘Oh yes. If you have nothing in the house to eat, I must have been sent especially to help you. For I have here something that is almost magic.’ He took from his pocket and held lovingly in his hand a plain bent nail. She looked at it with reluctant curiosity.

“ ‘Give me a pot of water on the boil, and I’ll make you the finest nail broth you ever ate,’ he said pleasantly.

“When the pot was boiling with the nail bobbing about in the water, he stirred it carefully, and almost to himself he began remembering nourishing broths he had made that very week with this same nail. ‘Of course, it may be a bit thin tonight,’ he admitted, ‘because only yesterday I used it in the hunting lodge of the Baron of Blekinge.’

“ ‘The Baron of Blekinge,’ she cried incredulously. He appeared not to notice her amazement and pleasure at the aristocratic name.

“ ‘Wonderful broth I made for him from this nail,’ he said. ‘But, to be sure, he *did* have a handful of meal to add to it.’

“The old woman’s eyes glinted. If only a little meal stood in the way of her having a supper as good as the Baron of Blekinge enjoyed. . . . Grudgingly, but with her pride challenged, she went to the cupboard and produced not one but two handfuls of meal.

“ ‘There,’ she said with a chuckle, ‘if the Baron has one, we’ll allow ourselves two. What do you think of that?’

“The wayfarer clucked his approval, and the two of them smiled understandingly at each other over the boiling pot.

“ ‘The Baron said that if I had arrived but one night earlier, we should have had salt beef to add to our broth,’ he mused after a few moments.

“ ‘Salt beef, is it?’ the old woman said gruffly. Then her face flushed with excitement at the idea of excelling such aristocratic hospitality as the Baron had offered.

“While the stranger was putting in the fragments of beef, he said thoughtfully, ‘I wish with all my heart I had a few grains of coffee, so I could make a cup to toast my lady’s generosity. . . .’

“ ‘Who says we have no coffee?’ she replied brusquely.

“When it was brought and the aroma admired, the wayfarer said, ‘Let us set out this feast on an embroidered cloth, grandmother. For such an occasion as this, we must have everything as fine as you deserve.’

“The old woman blushed at the compliment, for it had been years since anyone had said such a thing to her. In her happy confusion she went to the cupboard and brought out the best cloth, and while her guest was laying it she thought, Such a guest as this deserves a hostess in a gown, not a mean old woman in a work apron.

“She excused herself and went into the bedroom to change into her Sunday frock. On the window sill she saw the blossom of her house plant. Recklessly she broke it off and pinned it in her hair, hardly daring to look at herself in the mirror.

“Just before they sat down on either side of the table, she lighted the two candles she had been saving for her funeral bier, and stood them in the center, for she knew that she might never again be entertaining a man who had such magnificent ideas as this man had.

“He lifted his coffee cup and drank her a toast. ‘Here’s to a gracious and charming woman,’ he said. ‘People deserve the best they give to each other.’

“She beamed with pride, for here was a man at last who really appreciated her. Who understood her as she never had been understood before.

“And I shall never be poor again, she thought to herself, now that I know how to make broth out of an old nail.”

Education Yet?

Memory is a slick politician who will support either side of the argument loyally. On some days when I think I probably had the best childhood ever known, my memory pops up with all kinds of corroborating evidence. Even school was a carefree paradise, as I remember it then.

At other times I recall that my school days were terribly serious business. I see myself a heroic and studious child, worrying incessantly and studying far into the night, long after everyone else was slothfully asleep. I think to myself, "Nothing I have had to face as an adult was as crucial as what I bore every day as a child. Examinations, for instance! Education is grim pain most of the way."

But it doesn't look so very grim as our children live it today. The parents' meetings I attend give the impression that it is abhorrent for anything to make our children feel concerned or responsible.

"Bringing home excellent grades is not nearly so important as students becoming well adjusted," we're frankly told.

Meanwhile the high school students I know seem dangerously well adjusted. And furthermore, let us not even mention anything so painful (though unimportant) as grades. Let us not show our old-fashionedness, shall we? Let's take education the way it is, concealing whatever tremors we feel about it.

Today, for example, I heard a car pulling in with sound effects into our drive. I was expecting someone, so I ran out to meet what I thought would be a taxi. Instead there was a bright scarlet car heaving with a kangaroo lurch under our porte-cochere. It was packed with youngsters, five of them and a beaming little man next to the driver. "Okay . . . put on brakes, yet!" he was shouting.

I was so surprised by the banner hanging on the side of the car that at first glance I didn't recognize the occupants. The banner said, "Drivers Instruction. Beverly Hills High School." There, sitting behind the wheel, was Boo, looking pink-faced and triumphant.

"Well, I got the brakes on yet," she said explosively, and the instructor, who turned out to be an enterprising refugee hired by the school as part of its Social Studies program, daubed at his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"You expected the oleander to jump out of the way already?" he asked.

I said, "To what do we owe the honor of this unexpected visit?" Nobody

paid any attention to my nervous attempt to be light-handed.

Boo said proudly, “We’ve got the champion lousy driveway. I told Mr. Manheim about how nobody hardly ever drives in or out of it without running off onto the grass, or mowing down the rosebushes, or nosing into the side of the wall.”

Mr. Manheim said genially, “So I say if it’s as bad as she says, we make it our official place for practicing getting into driveways.”

“It’s an honor,” Boo said. “I was going to keep it as a surprise for you.”

“Well, thanks very much,” I beamed, trying not to anticipate what it would be like to have this onslaught every day.

“I mean the whole thing,” Boo explained. “I wasn’t going to tell you until I had my license, and then I was going to show you kind of casually.”

A boy volunteered, “That wouldn’t work, stupid. You have to have your parents’ signature before you can take the driving test.”

Another boy said, “It’s quite a sharp idea, though. They figure now that you can’t consider yourself as having a high school education unless you can drive a car.”

I said humbly, “Dr. Albert Einstein never could drive a car.”

Nobody heard me except Mr. Manheim, who said boastfully, “I could have taught him to drive all rightie. Dr. Einstein could have graduated from high school without any trouble already.”

They backed the car down the drive, taking only a mild swoop onto the grass, and charging at one trembling rosebush.

A boy in the back seat shouted out, “Hey, there, you scared the pants off of that rosebush!”

Then there was a general reshuffling, and a new driver slid under the wheel. I watched three out of the five wage the battle of the bushes, and then I went cravenly into the house. Everybody was having a lovely time, and I didn’t want to be a wet blanket on such sport.

But that gaunt impostor my memory has invented as myself-when-young, couldn’t help muttering, “This is education already?”

Prescription: Dose of Children

(*shake well before using*)

I always did enjoy eavesdropping. (It's legitimate if you're a writer, so no apologies.) Some of the best conversations are the ones that are none of your business.

For instance, in the beauty shop where I go to catch up on *Vogue*, I heard a little girl begging her mother, who was under the dryer, to let her have a permanent.

The mother said, "Of course not. Do you think I have a money bush somewhere?"

The child said cheerfully, in a tone too low to be heard under the dryer, "I water it every day."

Another time I overheard what was evidently a new child eagerly getting acquainted with some of the early settlers in our neighborhood.

"I'm not very well adjusted," the new little girl said. "So if I say anything you don't like, why I probably don't mean it. Okay?"

A jacaranda tree grows outside my study window, and from this I pick up some good eavesdropping. A jacaranda tree is fine for little boys to sit beneath and talk. Today they were boasting about how brave they were. Boasting, one of the most ancient masculine sports, flourishes uninhibited when males are alone. For females are all too often dismally realistic.

"Would you really sock him one?" a small chap was asking a slightly bigger boy.

"Would I?" the eight-year-old said in a fierce voice. "Just let me get the chance."

"What would you do?"

"I'd sock him one . . . then I'd run like the mischief," the boaster said.

It took them a few minutes to see the humor, then they rolled on the grass with glee.

Every adult needs a few children on his perimeter. If you've become a little top-heavy maybe you need a daily dose. The prescription says "Shake well"; it's talking about the patient, not the remedy.

Fortunately for all of us, there's no shortage of children these days. Every street, every train and plane, every supermarket teems with children ready and willing to help you with your ailment of ossified adulthood. And parents are quite willing to share their young.

A friend of mine crossed the country in a daycoach.

"However did you manage?" she was asked.

"Manage? Why, I just got on the train and forgot the kids. All kinds of people took them over."

A bachelor I know says, "Traveling is more broadening this year than ever. I had kids in my lap the whole trip."

"I thought you didn't like children," I reminded him.

He grinned sheepishly. "I used to get 'em in my hair . . . this year I've got 'em in my arms."

Sometimes people admit they're afraid of children. "I don't know how to get along with them." But all you have to do is to smile back. Nobody has ever written a juvenile book on "How to win friends and influence people." Children are born knowing.

Once you've opened this new window in your viewpoint, you've got a real hobby. Children are never too busy to have fun. You get the idea when you're with them that there's nothing more important than being happy. Just possibly they're advance pioneers with that discovery; maybe nothing *is* more important.

Children can enjoy almost anything, even mild emergency. I heard a little boy say, "We had a keen time. Had to sit for nearly two hours on a broken-down bus. More fun! I thought maybe we might have to stay there all night."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I ate a lady's lunch. Then when they got to looking at the motor, the driver let me hold the flashlight. Golly. More fun!"

A very learned man was telling me about a boy who has befriended him.

"How big is he?" I asked, trying to get a picture of this companionship.

"How big? Why, I don't know . . ." He made a vague indication of height. "Anyway he comes just about up to my funnybone."

The 200-Watt Mystery

Our little Tumpti was full of mysteries. When you knew him you saw why the cliché "inscrutable" sticks like a Band-Aid to the word "Oriental." Almost everything Tumpti did was a mystery, and added to that was the mystery of *how* and *why*.

But there was one abiding question furnishing speculation endlessly. How on earth did he spend his evenings in his room? The second morning he was with us, he came out to the breakfast table with indignation disfiguring his pleasant little face. Perilously he was balancing a radio on one outspread hand.

"I no rike," he said.

"Well, then don't listen to it," we suggested.

"Please take out of my loom. It get in my way."

"Sometime there might be a program you wanted to hear, and then you'd have it handy."

"Take out or I blake it," he said with a meaningful look in his eye. "I dlop it accidentally."

We took it out. Also we took out the TV set that had been the condition on which our last help had consented to give us her slipshod services.

"Perhaps you'd rather read," I suggested. "You can borrow any of the books you see around."

"I bollow no books."

"Or magazines . . . and of course we have three newspapers coming in every day."

"Newspaper I wrap up tlash in," he said with dignity.

Someone who was at that moment eating one of his excellent popovers said defensively, "So he doesn't read. What's so funny about that?"

He glared at the table in general. "I need better erectric right in my loom. No good. Luin eyesight."

"Of course," we said placatingly. "We keep the bulbs in the mop closet. Take all you need."

"I use 200 watts erectric right," he said, and we looked delighted.

When he had gone back to the kitchen, leaving the radio precariously perched on the edge of a chair, we carried on a family conversation with eyebrows.

Somebody whispered, “What on earth do you suppose he does do at night?”

“Whatever it is, he wants to see what he’s doing.”

Boo said, “He probably meditates. Aren’t they great meditators?”

“But they do that best in the dark, don’t they?”

We all shrugged our shoulders, giving up the guessing game.

But whatever it was he did, he kept at it until long after midnight, for you could see the little magnolia tree which stands near his window, illuminated like one of Nightingale’s prize-garden effects. His window blind was pulled tightly down so there was no space for even an ant to peek. But the brilliance of his two 200-watt bulbs made a Japanese lantern of the room. We just couldn’t help being intrigued by the mystery.

“Probably something very simple, like playing a long game of chess with an opponent in Japan. Anyway I know we’ll find out sometime. In this world stuff just doesn’t stay mysterious, alas.”

But we didn’t find out for a very long time. And when we did the answer was so preposterous that no amount of wildest guessing would ever have uncovered it.

Carats of Kindness

When we were children living in a humble part of town, we soon accepted the fact that all that glitters is not gold. We had a riddle which asked: “Why is Christmas jewelry like grass?” The answer, in case you weren’t a child in that naïve period, was “Because they both turn green in the spring.”

This is a story, a true story, about a piece of Christmas jewelry.

We didn’t have much jewelry in my family . . . my mother’s wedding ring, and her engagement ring with a diamond not much bigger than a grain of rice, and my father’s lodge pin.

But we *knew* people who owned jewelry. One Christmas my mother’s best friend got a big round gold bracelet from her husband. We were stunned by such magnificence. But I was guilty and shamed because our mother, who was such a wonderful woman, had no bracelet . . . and little chance of ever owning one.

When she and I talked of the beauty I said passionately, “When I grow up I’m going to buy you a gold bracelet. The most beautiful one I can find.”

Then suddenly in myself I swore a reckless vow. I wouldn’t wait until I grew up. I’d manage to get it for her by the very next Christmas. She would see . . . everyone would see. . . .

I was fourteen that year, the age when all one needs to ride forth on a great crusade is a deeply felt cause. I knew, of course, that I couldn’t buy such a gift by any childish “saving” of my allowance, for even if I saved every penny, it would be absurdly inadequate. I would have to earn some real money. I’d have to venture out into competitive adult enterprise.

I took the newspaper into the bathroom, locked the door, and combed the column called Business Opportunities. Regular employment was not feasible for someone with school on her hands. But I could carry on a business . . . presumably from a locked bathroom. Most of the opportunities, though glowing, sought a partner with capital. Obviously I couldn’t qualify. But at last I found an offer of a size I could manage.

You had to send a dollar right away. Well, I could do that, by borrowing seventeen cents. Then the Dixie Mailing Company would tell you how to multiply the investment by at least a hundred a month. My head swam.

Each day I ran home from school in a fever, hot with hope. At last my

instructions arrived, a flamboyant piece of wishful rhetoric. It explained exactly what was to be done, and how to word the letters with which you started your career.

You selected small businesses, then promised the proprietors that you could increase their gross. You saved your method for the follow-up letter. At the right time you explained that you would find new customers, for which you would ask 10 per cent of the first hundred dollars each spent. As soon as you got the little businessman signed up, you went to work on the customers. You promised them a rebate of 5 per cent on the hundred dollars they spent. It sounded wonderful. I had postage enough for only eight letters, but I wrote them neatly, and the feverish waiting began again.

Of the eight, one replied . . . a postcard saying,

Dear Sir: Drop in and discuss your prop.

WILHELM METZEROTH.

I walked past his store a dozen times before I got up my courage. I explained who I was, and he asked solemnly about my proposition. Then he called his *vife* from upstairs. Four round blue eyes inspected me while he told her my story in a volley of rich German. Then their roars of laughter put me out of business in nothing flat. Even now I cannot relive the moment without embarrassment.

So I knew there would be for me no easy way of wealth.

Then suddenly I remembered our pearls. We loved oysters, and whenever we bit down on a hard object, the whole family became richer by one pearl. Rather dark, of course, and sometimes lopsided. But certainly genuine, since pearls come from oysters. We kept them in a twist of tissue paper, and they belonged to us all jointly.

I counted out my one-fourth.

The next interview took even stiffer courage, for this time it was no genial neighborhood grocer I had to deal with, but a well-dressed man in the precious-gems section of the best jewelry store in the city.

I unfolded my tissue on purple velvet; the rather grandfatherly man behind the counter looked at my pearls gravely. Then he took off his glasses and looked at me.

I said nervously, “I thought whatever the regular price of pearls is, I’d gladly sell these at a reduced rate. I know they need polishing, and of course

they're not very large. . . ."

He looked at the grayish little globules again, then he asked, "May I know, Miss, why you have decided to sell these . . . gems?"

I had not expected to tell him, for it was quite a personal matter. But somehow I found the words tumbling out. He listened sympathetically and asked a few questions, and in a few minutes I was showing him the snapshot of my mother, which was the only wealth I carried in my purse.

He looked closely at her picture, and after a moment he said, "I also loved my mother very much. But I didn't have a chance to do nice things for her because she died when I was still a little shaver."

Then he became businesslike. "Look here. I've got to be honest with you because you've been honest with me. I *could* say we just don't happen to need any pearls right now. Then you'd go on hoping. But I've got to tell you . . . these aren't pearls. They're worthless. Edible oysters don't produce pearls."

The floor felt as if it were collapsing under me. Mercifully appearing not to notice, he went on talking, telling me about pearls. Then he began explaining the possibility of my earning the money I needed. He had a sister who worked in the employment office of a small department store. Did I think . . . of course I thought! I could work on Saturday afternoons. Saturday mornings we cleaned house. I could do anything. He wrote down his sister's name and gave it to me.

Then, since I was there, I thought I might just look at some gold bracelets. Together we walked to another department. Under glass was a tray on which gleaming gold bracelets nestled in velvet cradles. I stopped, breathless.

"Not these," he said hastily. "I'm afraid we'd find these rather expensive. But I have others."

He disappeared, then came back with three bracelets in his hand. They were just as beautiful as any bracelets on earth could be . . . and one especially.

"I think you might afford one of these," he said.

"But . . . how much?" I asked tremulously.

"Well, the price might possibly vary through the year . . . gold prices rise and fall, you understand. It would depend on many things." He went on with some kind of adult double-talk, the dazzle of which I couldn't quite follow. Then he said, "As a matter of fact, if you find you can earn the money, I might get a special discount for you. The wholesale price, perhaps, under the circumstances."

“But if I had some idea,” I said timidly. “So I’d know how hard I would have to work.”

He looked carefully at me quite a long time. Then he said something which has probably done more than any other single remark to influence me.

“To succeed in anything,” he said gently, “one always works a little harder than one feels possible.”

Getting the job wasn’t simple, even with his sister’s help. A fourteen-year-old wouldn’t fit everywhere. But at last I fitted. Now it was late February; much time had been wasted. Finally I had my first pay for one-half day, three precious quarters.

That winter I went in several times to look at the glorious bracelet. Each time it had become more beautiful. When I had earned five dollars, I took the fresh bill to my friend. “I’d like to have you lay the bracelet away,” I said, trying to sound businesslike. “I am prepared to make a down payment. Also I don’t believe you mentioned the price.”

He looked at me keenly and asked how much I thought I could earn by Christmas. I computed rapidly, adding in my allowance recklessly.

“I might be able to pay twenty-five dollars,” I said. “But I’d be a lot more comfortable if it cost twenty.”

He said firmly, “It costs twenty-two.”

“I’m sure I can make that,” I said confidently.

But in October I caught diphtheria. Several nights in delirium I was tortured by gold hoops, and my mother seemed crying her eyes out about something I couldn’t quite understand. The diphtheria infuriated me; it was a conspiracy against my determination. The time I had to waste just couldn’t be made up before Christmas. All the work, all the Saturday afternoons when I’d given up fun with my contemporaries would just go for nothing.

The middle of December I went again to see my friend. I had decided to tell him frankly I couldn’t get the twenty-two dollars by Christmas. What about the discount? Had he forgotten that?

“But the twenty-two dollars is *with* the discount,” he said uneasily. “Without that, the price would be considerably higher.”

I saw now he had lost faith in me. I felt utterly defeated. Maybe I should have told him about the diphtheria . . . but it sounded like an excuse, a crybaby excuse. . . .

Then I had an inspiration. “Couldn’t you let me have the bracelet by Christmas, and I could go on working and paying you through January and February?” I said weakly. “You’d be perfectly safe if you trusted me.”

“Unless something happened to you. Like illness, for instance.”

“Nothing would happen to me,” I said fiercely. “I’m healthy as a horse.”

He thought quite a long time, then he said not too certainly, “Well . . . next Saturday, after you finish your work, you come in, and I think I can promise to let you have the bracelet.”

Christmas came on Monday. But I couldn’t endure the suspense, so my mother had her bracelet on Christmas Eve. Never on earth was a gift so adored; never was a giver so showered with love. Everyone in the neighborhood came to admire; nobody could believe such a thing belonged to my mother.

The only cloud for me was that I still owed a little more than three dollars before I could honestly consider the bracelet was hers. I think no adult could worry about an obligation as that little girl worried about hers. Suppose something *did* happen to me? Would the jewelry store send police to our house? My family would be disgraced before everyone we knew. My grades slid into ignominy that midwinter.

But in time I got the last cent paid up, without tragedy gobbling me up.

My mother wore the bracelet all her life. When she no longer was with us, my father gave the bracelet to me. I couldn’t wear it at first, partly because it was too close to my grief. And also because as I grew up I had come to feel almost bitter about the salesman who had begun by being kind and had ended by exacting the last farthing from a worried half-sick child. He should have realized. . . .

Yet, often through the years I have recognized that I owed that man a great deal. For whenever I am tempted to spare myself the last cruel extra mile of effort, I have remembered him.

“Through the years . . .” One day a few months ago when I was thinking about all this, the phrase struck me. It suddenly occurred to me that this bracelet, this inexpensive piece of Christmas jewelry, had lasted an amazingly long time. I had always thought of the price in the child’s terms, but suddenly I saw that something odd was here. I counted the years. . . .

Then I happened to be in a fine jewelry shop in London. On an impulse I asked the salesman to look at the bracelet. What did he think it might be

worth?

“It’s a very fine piece, madam,” he said. “It’s pure gold. Eighteen carats, actually.”

I have written this now to apologize to that unknown grandfatherly man, whose 18-carat kindness I had wrongly appraised through the years.

All That's Lacking

There is always one special friend who confounds the whole family. In our case, we can see what Boo sees in Felicity; the mystery is why Felicity bothers with Boo. Felicity, contrary to her name, is a moody and devious child. Perhaps her mother had a premonition and hoped to ward off the moroseness with a name. Felicity is all agreeableness and smoothness on the outside of her behavior to adults. But already, though she is not yet sixteen, there is the fine print of shrewdness and discontent on her face.

But Boo likes her. Boo thinks she is "deep." Also cool. And in fact, crazy. (Crazy being the highest compliment of the moment.) So we do our best to make ourselves acceptable to Felicity. Which is no mean feat, and one we're never confident we've achieved.

Felicity's philosophy comes home to us, blithely borne by our own innocent-hearted child.

"Yes, but can happiness buy money?" We recognize where *that* comes from, without any quotation marks.

"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy . . . and never around when stuff happens."

"If all history teachers were laid end to end . . . but who wants to lay history teachers?" That one we pass with no comment, afraid of cracking the cellophane and letting out the real aroma.

You know Felicity. You've probably had a few of her in your own life, along the way.

Felicity wants to be a fashion designer when she has finished what she playfully calls her education. (My private opinion is that Felicity's knowledge was present, intact, in the original chromosome.) Education, the momentarily necessary evil, is really a campus to her; classrooms are only oases where you go to replot your strategy between the delightful surging of the crowds through the corridors. By crowds, naturally, we mean crowds of boys. Felicity doesn't count girls, except possibly as inert hurdles in an obstacle race.

Felicity does enjoy working in the art studio of our big high school. This you can understand when you see the freedom and camaraderie of the place. Everyone sits in tight little skirts with neat behinds innocently outlined, before big teacher-obscuring easels, and life can be delightful. And home work can

easily be construed as brooding over one's personal appearance, and planning fantastic costumes for oneself. Felicity is very good in Dress Design.

But her mother, a realistic and practical woman, is not sure. Her mother is all pulled apart and weary-looking from trying to make ends meet. You can see when you look at her that she knows how to stretch herself, but not the ends. She's determined that since Felicity will have to earn her own living at least until she can delude some man into earning it for her, she'd better be equipped to do something practical. So she says flatly, "Felicity can be a dress designer only if she shows so much talent that there's no risk about it. She can find out this year if she's good enough to go on."

So Felicity is on probation as far as dress designing is concerned.

"If she's terrific, her mother can't ignore the talent," Boo says. "And you know nobody is going to ignore anything that Felicity wants. Not permanently."

Today, as I quite often do, I found Boo waiting with Felicity deigning to be driven home in our car.

"Are you sure it's no bother?" Felicity says, pretending to wait for me to urge her. "I can easily walk home. It's only three miles, and I let all the other people drive off because I did want to help Boo with her geometry."

"We're thrilled to have you," I say. "Do get in, dear."

"Only if you're *sure*."

"We're terribly sure," I say. And this remark at least is utterly sincere.

Once in the car, she devotes herself to talking nicely to the old folks. "Might as well cement relations, never can tell when they might come in handy," you can almost hear her little mind saying to itself.

So I try to talk nicely to her. It would be a strategic breach on my part to let Boo convict me of not being as gracious as Felicity. Boo sits demurely, her blue eyes weighing both of us, for she suspects that there is something wrong with me as far as Felicity is concerned.

"How goes the fashion designing?" I ask brightly.

"Oh wonderfully, thanks," Felicity purrs.

"How does your mother feel about it now?"

"My mother?" she asks politely, as if she'd never heard of the individual.

"You remember what she told me that day you both came to luncheon with

us.”

“Oh?”

“That she’d let you go on studying only if she was sure you had unmistakable talent.”

Felicity is quiet a moment, then she says sweetly, “Oh, there’s no doubt about my talent.”

I crawl out from under the avalanche of that simple remark, and then I say, trying not to sound too acidly middle-aged about it, “Well, I’m glad to hear that. But of course talent is only part of the battle.”

“Battle?” she asks gently, as if I were a savage imperfectly equipped with the language.

“Well, what I mean is, talent is important. But hard work is equally important.”

“Oh, I see what you mean,” she says generously. “Actually, I’m capable of almost too much hard work. I never know when to stop. That’s what people tell me.”

Boo rushes in here to corroborate this thumbnail sketch of her darling. “Oh you don’t, Felicity! Everybody else falls by the wayside, and you go right on.”

Felicity says, not really hearing Boo, “Oh, I have plenty of talent. And I certainly know how to work. But there’s one thing I do lack. And that worries me.”

“For heaven’s sake, what is *that*?” I asked incredulously.

Felicity says with a little sigh, “I just haven’t enough self-confidence.”

Each to His Own Riches

People who love trees instantly recognize each other by an invisible family resemblance of the heart. Some of the nicest persons I know were introduced to me by my friends, the trees. Particularly the espalier trees. That word, in case you don't happen to be acquainted with that old line of aristocrats, describes the little fruit trees which have been shaped by patience, and by pruning which is art's faith in abundance. An espalier tree resembles its own shadow, having practically only two dimensions, height and width, and hardly more depth than a vine. It is as though the tree had been "pressed" like a keepsake flower, between the huge pages of the earth and the sky.

The best espalier trees . . . the ones you see in rural France and fashionable England, and on some of the most beautiful tapestries of the Gobelins . . . are geometric in design. Each little twig is planned according to pattern; they are rounded but strict right angles at the ends of perfectly horizontal limbs. When the fruits come . . . cherries, peaches, apples, or pears . . . they, too, are set in the design, like the fruit in illuminated parchments.

When you love and understand a tree, you own it, for that is the only possessorship there is. Three most publicly owned espaliers I know stand high above the Hudson, against the walls of one of the gardens of The Cloisters. The sun warms them there with a kind of double sunshine, browned on both sides. That is why spring always comes a little early to them, so that they are decked with nosegays of blossoms when blossoms are still incredible miracles in a city.

These trees introduced me to the man who cares for them, and he in turn gave me a card to his friend Nils Narvgaard, who is the head gardener on one of the big estates in Connecticut.

The day I arrived, Nils was sitting on the stone wall at the gate, waiting with a welcome. He had a deep Danish voice, a voice which no high wind could blow away, a seaman's voice. He had seaman's eyes, but a landsman's hands, strong, quick, and certain.

He knew his land . . . all the hundred acres of it . . . as intimately as you might know a beloved face, for he has lived with it for thirty-five years. They have grown up (but not old) together; they have gardened each other, you might say, for every acre which he has cultivated and cared for in the land has landscaped in him a matching acre of patience and joy, of planning and pruning and waiting-for-flower. You listen to his rich quiet words, his humor

and tenderness, and the strong mastery which takes no nonsense from wanton growth, no backtalk from weeds or brambles, and you think suddenly:

Which is the garden and which the gardener?

Then you glimpse the truth about all achievement, that it is no flowing away, but a double-running current which enriches every channel through which it streams.

"The Old Man loved those," Nils said, pointing to that screen of tall espaliers standing with outstretched arms against the sky. "He used to call them our taller brothers. He used to come down here with me, and we'd work side by side all day. We knew each other, he and I." Yes, I could see that. Two of them owned this land, though only one's name was on the tax bill.

Behind the espaliers lay the garden. Walking about in it, I could see the family and the years which lay beyond all this, clear as the lines of living on Nils's weather-worn face. While the garden had been building, Nils had seen a whole generation of this family swing around the clock. He had made a riding ring for the children's ponies; he had grown white lilacs for the young mother, and purple stock for the Old Madam. He had planted holly for Christmas, and forget-me-nots for debuts; he had marked the coming of a Swede into the family with an herb garden, and the marrying of a Scottish girl with a path of heather.

But now times had changed. A new world had come thumping at the gates. A bank is paying his salary now; a board of trustees is deciding what to do with him, and what to do with his garden. When you plant trees and a man's life in a garden, you cannot uproot them quickly when their day is done.

"The gardens aren't the same now," he said after a few minutes of silence. "Since the Old Man's gone, nobody cares about it any more. Young Mr. William never even comes down to look at it. Young people aren't the same."

"Maybe he will care later," I ventured. "Maybe he's just too young now."

"Maybe," he answered sadly. "But I don't think so. He hasn't got it in him. Young people . . . they haven't got anything to see a tree with."

"How young is he, your Mr. William?"

"Well, Mr. William . . ." He thought honestly about it, trying to give Mr. William every hope of the doubt. "Well, Mr. William must be fifty or so."

I tried to picture young Mr. William, who could have known this rich old gardener, and that no-less-rich Old Man, his father, if only he had known how to be introduced by a tree. What was he like, this man who could have been

rich himself, yet had chosen not to see riches?

“What kind of man is he?” I asked.

“He teaches at some university,” Nils said, trying fairly to give him his due. “He writes some kind of books . . . study books, I believe. He’s always shut up some place writing his books.”

“Oh! What kind of books? And what does he teach?”

The honest blue eyes came back from the top branch of the espalier trees, and he looked at me a long, thoughtful moment.

“I don’t know as I ever heard,” he said simply, with the dignity of indifference.

An Open Letter to a Baby

(*about to be born*)

My dear young friend (so young, in fact, you still wear a minus sign before your age!)

I've been told . . . by statistics, that is . . . that an awful lot of you little guys are making plans for arriving among us in the near future. This, in fact, is Baby Year. We've had bumper crops in cotton, wheat, and soy beans. In a massive muddled way the government deals with that. But now we're having a bumper crop of babies, and nobody knows what to do about it. Except make the best of it.

But your big business right now is to find yourself a good home. Sometimes that's not easy to do from a distance, which is supposed to lend enchantment to the view. I'm an old inhabitant around these parts, so I've lined up a few points which might help you.

It's not like hotel reservations, you know. You can't sleep a few nights and then check out if you don't like the place. Once you've unpacked your layette and signed the register, this is where you'll belong, for better or worse.

So pick your home carefully. Better still, don't bother about the *home* at all; what you'd better do is concentrate on The Parents. They're all that's going to matter. Homes will come and homes will go, but parents go on forever. If you have the right parents, it won't make any difference to you whether you live in a trailer or a penthouse. And if you've made poor pickings in fathers and mothers, no amount of house elegance will make up for the lack.

In this world we have scientific methods for detecting all sorts of things . . . all types of Geiger counters, so to speak. Chemicals for showing up this; instruments for registering that. But nobody's ever discovered a way of detecting a Good Parent hidden behind the disguise of an Ordinary Person.

Sometimes the people who know the most about babies can't get along with them in person . . . even schoolteachers don't always make good mothers. On the other hand some of the most unlikely-looking girls . . . selfish brats, tomboys and even career girls . . . often turn out to be inspired mothers when the moment arrives. (I don't know why I say "when the moment arrives"; I mean "when YOU arrive.")

One test, however, may help you. When you're looking around for a good

mother to give the job to, be sure you pick a woman who enjoys whatever she happens to be doing. They say, “If you want to get something done, ask a busy person to do it.” So if you want to get a mother you’ll really enjoy . . . and who’ll enjoy you, pick out one that’s already having fun. She doesn’t necessarily have to be a baby-fancier; you can take care of that later. Babies are an acquired taste. But she should be crazy about things in general; she should throw herself into whatever she’s doing. Enthusiasm; that’s what she’s got to have.

Don’t bother about the way parents look. There never was a mother who wasn’t beautiful when her child looks up into her eyes. And when you sit on your dad’s knee and see him grinning down at you over the proud swell of his chest, you’ll notice what a fine brave man he is. Other people may not always be able to see him clearly; but you will.

Don’t bother about their age. If they’re too young, you’ll age ’em. If they’re a bit on the oldish side, you’ll soon limber them up.

Be sure they’re in love with each other, if you can manage it. If they’re in love with each other, they’ll know how to love you. They’ll love you for yourself, and in addition, each will give you a second helping of love because of the other. If they’re in love with each other as they should be, they’ll keep you in your own little place, not trying to make you play a part emotionally too big for you, not batting you back and forth between your own world and what should be theirs. That kind of thing confuses a child.

Look in their bureau drawers if you insist on orderly people; and into their bank accounts if you feel you’re going to be an extravagance. But first of all, look into their hearts. If they are full already, there will be plenty of room there for you. A child *can* fill an empty or a shriveled heart, but it isn’t nice work and it won’t make you the kind of human you’ll enjoy being.

Notice your dad’s mouth, and his jaw and the glint in his eye. Pick him for firmness, like good fruit. Listen to the way he says “No.” A man who knows how to say the right kind of “No” will also stand behind his “Yes.”

You’ll be terribly unsure of things for the first twenty years (and a long time afterwards, probably). There’s nothing that makes a child feel as safe as good firm parents.

Pick people who play. You’ll teach them new games. But you’ll find your job easier if they already go picnicking, and swim, or ride bicycles, and in general *do* things. Be sure they don’t mind questions. You can tell whether or not there’s popcorn under a skull by the questions people ask.

Get into a big family, if possible. And be sure you have your full quota of grandparents.

I might as well admit that you're arriving among us at a very peculiar time. This is almost like another Genesis, because it seems a new world is being created. This time we'll have to take better care of it, all of us. This time we'll have to see, as God did, that it is "very good."

So, try to pick elastic people, so they can jump, and then land without breaking into pieces. Try to pick people who have their best treasures always with them, in their hearts and their minds. In the years ahead of us, the rich people will be the hard-working and the cheerful, the friendly and the ingenious . . . the ones who can make something out of whatever is at hand. Mothers who can make quick banquets, and fathers who can make "buddies" and helpers out of whatever strangers happen to be around them. People, in short, who can get along with themselves and each other, and who require little outside equipment.

Does it look like a big job you've got ahead of you, making a family out of two people who aren't even related to each other except by marriage? Well, it is a big job, but you can do it. Matter of fact, you're the only thing on earth that can accomplish it!

So come along, as many of you as dare, and get at it!

Invitation to the Waltz

When all of us had given up all hope about the Prom, suddenly everything was fine.

Boo came bursting in the back door. It was Tumpti's Thursday off and I was in the kitchen cooking dinner. I knew when I saw her that something earth-shaking had happened, for she had forgotten to change her gym shoes after the sixth period, and her eyes were even wilder than her hair.

"My goodness," I said, daring to say no more.

"Hi-ya keed," she said deliriously, evidently quoting some contemporary. She dumped her armful of books on the kitchen counter, and reached into the refrigerator for anything lying around loose. This insubordination could happen only on a Thursday, for Tumpti never allowed anyone to so much as guess what was in the refrigerator. She began chewing noisily, obviously not noticing what she was eating. Then she turned on the spigot and gulped down a glass of water. But still she couldn't trust herself to speak.

"What's for dinner?" she gasped at last.

"Oh, food," I said, trembling so that the lettuce leaves looked as if a high wind were whipping through them.

She now sat down with her feet far apart and her hands clutching her knees, the way the roller derby girls rest on television.

"What kind of a day did *you* have?" she exploded.

"Oh fine. Just fine," I said out of my dry mouth. "And how'd *you* get along?"

"Swell," she said. "Except in Probs. I flunked a test. First test I ever flunked in Probs. Must have had something on my mind."

She announced it so triumphantly that I murmured, "That's fine, dear."

She got up and loped around the kitchen aimlessly, bumping into things and flipping the gas burners on and off excitedly.

"Oh, by the way," she said at last, "a kid asked me to the Prom."

It was about as "by the way" as swearing before a notary public would have been. I attempted to match the casualness.

"Why, that's nice," I said. "Anybody I know?"

“Well, in a way you do know him. Sorta. You’ve talked to him on the telephone.”

“Oh, you mean . . . ?”

“Yep,” she said, and tossed a cookie into her mouth as if it were a basketball into the basket. Then around the crumbs, she grinned.

“Gosh,” she said, “I was beginning to get worried.”

“You were?” I cried in simulated astonishment. “I’m sure I can’t imagine what about. Somebody was bound to ask you, you’re so pretty and everything.”

She stood absolutely still now. “Am I?” she asked at last. She opened the cupboard door where a departed housekeeper’s mirror still hung, and studied her face earnestly.

“Well, it isn’t much,” she said honestly, “but I guess a guy could see that for himself. If he asked me he probably knows what he’s getting.”

I said to myself with fierce maternal prejudice, I doubt that. I doubt if any sixteen-year-old . . . even that wonderful life-saver whatever his name is . . . could possibly appreciate.

Aloud I said calmly, “We’ll have to begin to think about a formal, won’t we?”

“*Begin*,” Boo cried. “Are you kidding?”

Then we encountered each other’s eye, and we burst out laughing for sheer exuberance. Boo ran her fingers across her forehead and tossed off imaginary perspiration. “Eeek . . . wasn’t that an experience!” she said, and fell into my arms limply, like a boxer who’s just been set on his feet again after the ten-count.

A Speaking Part

One of our favorite people is Oliver Hinsdell, the drama coach. Outside he's a handsome and dignified-looking man. Inside . . . well, his students call him "Pop" with great affection.

It's a rare play that doesn't have at least one of his alumni appearing in it, in either a big role or a walk-on part. There are an awful lot of hopeful youngsters in our section of the world, expecting to be great actors some day. Until they really "make" it, they turn up in somewhat surprising places.

For instance, a girl student phoned Oliver to say she'd at last broken into the entertainment world.

"I suppose you couldn't really say it was *acting*," she said honestly. "But the costume is nice."

"Well, fine," Oliver said. "What's the costume?"

"I'm selling programs at the Hollywood Bowl, and they let me wear a lovely long flowing cape."

The real prize for optimistic interpretation, though, should have been given to a pretty eighteen-year-old we met the other evening as we were coming out of the Pilgrimage Play, held in that amphitheater which is ten acres of Biblical Jerusalem miraculously created in our Hollywood Hills.

This girl, seeing her beloved teacher in the silent crowd leaving the Pilgrimage Bowl, ran over to speak to him.

"Oh, Mr. Hinsdell . . . I've got a part," she said in an ecstatic whisper.

"I'm so glad," Oliver whispered back. "What are you playing? I'm afraid I didn't recognize you."

"Well . . . you didn't really see me. I'm backstage," she said. "But it's a speaking part, all right. I'm the scream of the woman taken in adultery."

The Yellow Dog

Probably the word I hear used more often than any other in connection with children is "security." I've come to the conclusion that security is something which, if you haven't it, you must talk about it. If you *do* have it, there's no point in mentioning it.

I don't believe we ever heard the word used about us when we were children. Yet I doubt if you could find more secure little individuals than we were. We knew it was a good world, held together by God in spirit, and by the firm hands of our mother and our father in the flesh.

Far from mentioning security, just the opposite category of words were said. But the contradictory words only made the undeniable fact more obvious to us.

One of the most lovable moments I remember went like this: Our father would be reading his newspaper after his day's work was finished, and we two children would be playing around quietly, waiting for him to notice us. Without looking at him, we could tell when he was ready for us, and we'd both hold our breath. Noisily then, he would fold up the paper.

"Ho-hum," he'd say, "I suppose there are no children in this house."

"Sure there are," we'd cry and leap at him, each of us scrambling up on a welcoming knee.

"Ugh, you kids are enough to smother a man," he'd say, making a terrible face. We'd chuckle, our noses pressed against his vest, feeling the fountain pen in his breast pocket, and hearing his heart pumping away reassuringly like the very motor that kept the universe running.

Then he'd say, "What I'd like is to find somebody who had a nice little yellow dog."

We had played this game ever since we could remember. So we would control our mirth and try to ask as seriously as possible, "What would you do if you found somebody who did have a little yellow dog, Daddy?"

"Why I'd see if he would be willing to trade it to me for two worthless, no-account youngsters."

"Us, Daddy?"

"Who else, do you suppose?"

“And then what would you do with the little yellow dog?”

“Why, I’d chase it off the premises,” he’d say, and we’d snuggle deeper, and now all three of us would be heaving with merry contentment.

The Night, at Last

I don't know how we lived through the suspense. I suppose every house that had a high schooler in it was enduring the same anguish. I had thought that if we just had an invitation to the Prom, the rest would all fall into place. But I was wrong. Every atom concerning the festive occasion was grim.

Shopping for the formal was not unalloyed joy, even though we had been told recklessly by the head of the house, "Now don't try to economize. Shoot the works."

Boo had responded to that, "Oh, we will. Put your mind to rest about that. Formals cost something fierce. Kids tell me their fathers are all furious."

Then she said, unfamiliar common sense protruding like teeth that need braces, "But I won't have to have anything else all year. Just thinking about me going to the Prom will keep me warm."

Even so, the shopping was a savage safari. After school each day we trekked relentlessly from shop to shop. Nothing would do. The formal had to be similar to everybody's, but not identical to anyone's. It had to be sophisticated, yet not *too*. Most of all, it had to be something Felicity would approve.

"What I gotta have," Boo explained tremulously, "is a dress that makes my hair look longer, and me look shorter. It's got to make my nose not so turned up, and my hands not so big. And it's got to be something real long, that will stay out of my way so I won't trip and drag us both to the floor."

As you see, it was quite an order for a mere dress. But at last we found the perfect one, pink and cloudy . . . something we could remember a lifetime, like her first hat, trimmed with a cluster of commas and long velvet streamers.

I said, "I suppose the boys' parents have to go through the same ordeal of shopping."

"Oh, no. Boys are supposed to wear rented tuxes," Boo said. "Wouldn't make any sense to buy a tux before a boy gets his growth. School fixes up the deal. Costs six dollars, without pants."

During this tense prelude Boo became a new person, difficult and moody like someone facing a great concert or a court trial. She had to be spoken to at least twice when anyone asked her a question, then she seemed to drag herself up from a well, dull-eyed and pale and dripping with worry. She couldn't eat,

whereas normally she couldn't be filled up.

"All I care about eating is celery. Or maybe olives," she said languidly.

She and this mysterious Winthrop Rawes avoided each other as if they were partners in a crime about to be uncovered. Each afternoon when she came home I'd ask tactfully, "How was Winthrop today?"

"How should I know?" she said peevishly. "We don't discuss his wonderful condition in Probs. We've got better things to do."

"Did you thank him for his invitation, dear?"

"Good heavens, no," she cried in horror. "What'd you think I *am*?"

"A well-brought-up girl, I hope," I said primly.

"Perish the perish."

Then suddenly this mutual ignoring became a worry, for worries could spring up from anything like weeds on well-fertilized soil. Suppose he hadn't really asked her? Maybe she had only imagined it.

"Nonsense," I said staunchly. "Of course he asked you."

"He kind of mumbled," Boo said. "Now that I think of it, I was kind of excited. And he *didn't* ask the time he telephoned."

"He was scared," I said. "I guess boys get scared too."

She looked as if she couldn't believe such heresy.

My heart ached with pity for all of them who were suffering the terrible malady of youngness.

"Tomorrow you just say something nice to him," I suggested. But Boo paled at the thought.

"I wouldn't know what to say."

"Couldn't you just be natural?"

"Certainly not," she said. "At our age it isn't natural to be natural."

"Nonsense. You'll have a perfectly wonderful time. Do you think we should get you a nice little corsage?"

"Heavens no! A gardenia is included in the three and a half bucks the bid cost," she said. Then with a lightning quick change of mood, she went on, "I'll press it in the dictionary afterwards, and tell my children it came from my very First Prom."

“Well, all right. But tomorrow you speak to him nicely. Tell him you’re looking forward.”

“Oh please,” she said. “I gag at the thought.”

But during the night she thought of a sufficiently casual way of mentioning it. She came bounding down to breakfast. “I’ve got it! I’ll say, ‘How on earth did you find out my telephone number the time you called . . . before you asked me to the Prom?’ That sound okay?”

“Perfect,” I said, refraining from pointing out that anyone with the strength to open the telephone directory could have managed the feat.

At last the day was upon us. It dawned looking like just any ordinary day. “Here it is,” we said to each other. “And we didn’t have to bribe, kidnap, twist wrists, or skip town. Things finally straighten out, seems like.”

Boo came to breakfast haggard and hysterical. “Guess what day this is?”

“Can’t imagine,” we said in unison.

“How’ll we ever get through classes?” she asked bleakly.

“Education should be suspended, and let joy reign unconfined,” I said comfortingly.

But it looked like anything but joy unconfined. Somehow the day crawled past; dinner finally was behind us, though Boo had not been able to swallow a mouthful, and her wrist watch had been looked at every five minutes.

“He’s not coming until quarter of nine,” she said. “What on earth shall we do in the meantime?”

We made facetious suggestions, and she said wearily, “No humor, *please*. Just for this once.”

When it was time to dress, she was so undone I thought I’d have to put her to bed. “My hair’s a fright. I’d better wash it again. Maybe we could set it better.”

“It looks lovely.”

“I wish we hadn’t got pink. Pink brings out my nose.”

“Pink’s lovely,” I said, prepared to reinforce every collapse, one by one. At last she was dressed, with a drop of my perfume in the bend of her elbow. Everything was proper except the contents of her little evening bag, which seemed a kind of first-aid kit for any emergency that a vicious fate could think up. There were safety pins, bobby pins, two rubber bands, a needle and thread,

adhesive tape, and the lucky old snail shell she used to carry in her blue-jeans pocket when she played short stop on the eighth-grade baseball team. Also her lipstick, which she hoped to heaven she could remember to use once or twice.

She bore little resemblance to herself; that was what really steadied her nerves. “Why, I look positively human,” she breathed in amazement.

Suddenly there was a thunderous rumbling of motor in the drive and she said, “He put it together himself from parts of one thing and another. That’s what somebody told me. It’s a real great car.”

Actually it sounded like a space ship, but we didn’t mention that. The doorbell rang, and before anyone could stir, it rang again.

Boo shrieked in a squeak, “Somebody answer it! The guy’ll think he’s got the wrong house. He’ll leave!”

On trembling knees, I descended the staircase. When I opened the door and saw him hunched nervously in his rented coat, I wanted to take him in my arms. He was a child-type boy; he was the kind of boy that Boo is a girl. They were two of a kind.

He was huddled under the watery gleam of the porch light, a big muscular man’s body with a youngster’s pink face uneasily floating above it. The transparent cage for the gardenia that had “come” with the bid, twinkled in his big hand.

“Is this the residence . . . I mean does Boo live here?”

“Indeed she does,” I said, trying not to sound too excessively welcoming. We shook hands tentatively.

“I hope I’m not too early . . . or late, or anything,” he blurted out in that furry voice which was all I had known of him until now.

“You’re just right,” I said dizzily. “You couldn’t be better, Winthrop.”

We went into the living room and sat edgily on two chairs. We both started at once to say something, then both plunged into silence with a pardon-me, then we bumped words again. Then we laughed . . . and everything between us was fine.

“Fact is, I’m kind of nervous,” he said. “You see, I’ve . . . well, I’ve never been out with a girl before. Without parents or anything.”

I said, “Don’t worry about it. You two’ll take care of each other, and everything will be fine.”

“I sure hope so,” he said doubtfully.

Then without warning, Boo stood in the door, looking belligerent above her pink cloud of dress. Winthrop scrambled to his feet, fumbled with the slippery corsage box, and it bounced maliciously on the floor. He picked it up slowly and handed it, upside down, to Boo, who nearly dropped it again in the scuffle.

"Gosh," he said, "I wasn't expecting you to look so . . . well, so good." He perceived now that this was not the tactful thing to say, and he began blushing.

"Think nothing of it," Boo said. "I wasn't expecting it myself."

Somehow they managed to get out of the house without too much clumsiness, for bashfulness was a fog of silence through which they couldn't grope to reach each other. At last the door closed upon them, and in a moment the throttled thunder of Winthrop's real great motor rattled the windows of the house. I felt as if I'd like to go to bed with an ice pack.

Instead I went out to the kitchen and there everyone had gathered, even Tumpti.

"We're starved to death," they said. "Seems we haven't eaten a comfortable meal for weeks."

Tumpti was beaming. "I hungly too. I eat rittle lice, please."

The Right Man for the Job

If there's anywhere that the editorial "we" is precisely justified, it is in gardening in Southern California. When someone says, "We're putting in snapdragons this week," he doesn't mean that he personally will be down on his knees with a trowel in his hand. He knows you'll understand, if you too are a California gardener, that it is a corporation, and that the owner of the property is only a very small stockholder. He may make suggestions, but the Mexican or Japanese gardener has the final say, and it is practically always "no." And of course the mere owner must not tamper with the doing, in any case.

There are good reasons for this, mostly having to do with the climate. In New England a garden-loving citizen can work through a happy small segment of the year. Then there comes a nippy day when the garden has reached its zenith and all passion is spent. There comes a day, in fact, when a realistic gardener says to his creation, "What you need now is a damn good frost."

Then he can go in and curl up comfortably by the fire, and forget the whole strenuous subject for at least eight months.

But in California it's different. You can't forget it for a minute. There is desert drought to be kept at bay; there are hordes of garden pests which are never decently thinned out by the law of survival of the fittest because nothing . . . *but nothing* . . . ever wipes out any of their eggs or young; and there is also the adobe soil, always eager for a chance to become heavy clay again unless you keep leavening it expensively with commercial nourishment which the gardener adds to his towering bill every single month. So gardening is a twelve-month-a-year pursuit, and you've no choice about it.

The gardener himself is imperatively necessary. I've longed to hear of a house owner who revolted, and said, "Just let nature fight it out on my land. Let the bushes become Frankensteins and strangle the windows. Let the soil either go mad with galloping growth or sulk back to destitution, whichever it pleases. As for me, I've finished bowing down and serving the situation."

I expect if such a rebel did arise, the neighbors would get up a petition and have him evicted. At any rate, all houses are surrounded by neatly barbered lawns and embellished by shrubs, flowers, succulents, and trees (which have to be pruned once a year at a cost of a hundred and seventy-five dollars, at least). So the gardener is the least of your worries. You just add his salary and expenses to the other costs of blessedness, and try not to be harassed by the

whole subject.

You soon learn it wouldn't do you any good to want to be creative and participating. Gardeners have their own inflexible ideas, and if you do propose something, they have two ways of rejecting it. They either argue the idea to death, or if you persist in your folly, they expensively plant and then sit on their heels watching the stuff die. *That* will show you.

Our first gardener was a Japanese we inherited when we bought the house. He was a neat, tightly built little chap of no discernible age. His name was Yosh, he said, turning on the brightness of his teeth. When Tumpti took over the inside of the house we expected that he and the gardener would be friends. But Tumpti had other ideas. Tumpti would have liked taking charge of the gardening himself, if there had only been more hours in the day. As it was, he gave infuriating orders and even planted sprouts and cuttings which he gleaned from the alley. But Yosh would have none of him.

We just kept the windows closed while the war went on, for wild Japanese flew back and forth between them and any innocent bystander was liable to be felled.

"They'll eventually come to peace," we assured each other. "Dogs, roosters, and Japanese have to fight it out until they find out who's the boss."

"I bet on Tumpti."

"But Yosh is a third of his age."

"You wait and see."

So the battle went on. To supplement the treasures he picked up in our alley, Tumpti would bring home on Friday mornings after his Thursday off little flats of Japanese herbs. These he planted in the choicest part of the garden and outlined with whitewashed stones. But the next Tuesday when Yosh appeared, they would disappear, and the battle would wage hotter.

Tumpti said, "I leave. That gardener clazy."

"Sure he is," we said placatingly. "Just ignore him."

"I do gardening in spare time," he proposed, his ancient hands quivering with eagerness to take on more work.

With rank cajolery we persuaded him that such work was unworthy of his talents. But peace didn't reign.

Then suddenly, to everyone's surprise, harmony stretched over the domain. The tall skinny Japanese in the big straw hat would pass the tiny dimunitive

one in the starched white clothes, and not a word would be exchanged.

"You see!" we said knowingly to each other. "They're just like dogs and roosters."

Then one day I went out to speak to Yosh about maybe if he didn't mind, he wouldn't sprinkle the terrace today because we were having people for tea out there.

He stood up respectfully and took off his big straw hat. Something was slightly different in his appearance, but I couldn't put my finger on the change.

Was it his teeth? Good heavens, had Tumpti . . .? We talked for quite a long time while I cogitated on his slightly changed appearance, calling him Yosh with all politeness.

At last he said, "I'm not Yosh. I'm Tosh. Yosh's brother."

"Oh? What happened?"

"I work for you now."

"You do? What became of Yosh?"

He avoided looking up at the house. "He got another job," he said courteously.

"Well . . . I hope you enjoy working for us," I said timidly.

"I wait and see. I only work one month, then I see."

I worried through that month, confiding in nobody. Any kind of upheaval in the help is a bother, to coin a classic understatement. I felt relieved every time I saw the tall figure in the big straw hat appear draped in his serpents of garden hose, with his power lawn mower and the truck load of implements he carries to impress any neighbors who might be thinking of changing gardeners. Occasionally, of course, there would be noisy flare-ups between Tumpti and Tosh. But at least we still had them both.

Two months went by, and I forgot we had had trouble. In fact it seemed that Tosh now had a foolproof technique. If Tumpti went out and screamed at the squatting gardener, he paid not the slightest attention, never even looking up.

Eventually, once again, I had to go out and speak to Tosh, and once again as I tentatively stated my errand, I became conscious that there was a slight difference in appearance. After I finished what I had to say, there was a long silence. Then the tall figure smiled, and in a high, rocking voice said, "Please, I not Tosh. I'm Tosh's brother. My name Kosh."

“Why . . . when did this happen?” I cried in surprise.

He looked at me blankly. I could see he wanted to answer me, but for some reason wasn’t sure of what to say. Then he smiled a pleased confidential smile.

“I deaf man,” he said. “Tosh hear too good. So he give up job. I leave hearing aid in truck when I come work for you, please.”

The Money on the Mantel

We had a gift given to us when we were children that was a rather strange thing. We had many things given to us and we loved them all. But this was something we still use years later. It happened like this.

One wintry afternoon our mother was baking fruitcake, and she found she was all out of citron. The "tea store" was the best place to buy citron, and that was quite a long way from our house, so both of us children went after it, to keep each other company.

"I'm going to have to give you a five-dollar bill," our mother said, while we were pulling on our overshoes, "and please be careful of the change. Five dollars is a lot of money. So listen to me, please, and stop monkeying-and-fooling." (That was a wonderful verb of hers . . . monkey-and-fool! Do mothers use it still?)

There were more instructions, and we half listened to them. I put the leather change purse in my pocket because I was the bigger, and we started off, monkeying-and-fooling along the snowy streets, and thoroughly enjoying ourselves.

The tea store was a wonderful place, smelling of travel. On the walls were painted scenes from Ceylon and China and Siam. Tall burlap bags of coffee and peanuts, and beans, kidney and lima and navy, stood around invitingly open, and as you waited, you dribbled the beans through your fingers and nobody told you not to. The spices and the big, cloudy amber globes of citron lived in little glass-fronted bins, lined with lace-paper doilies.

There were always grownups in the store, for it was a place where people enjoyed shopping. We waited and waited our turn, and at last it came. The clerk got out the big citron, carved off a delicious sugar-coated crescent, and weighed it. We gave him the bill, and he gave us the change.

We scampered along toward home, and suddenly I remembered that he had given me only a handful of coins. No bills. We ran back; we told him timidly.

"Oh no, little girl. You only gave me a dollar bill," he said cheerfully, but firmly. And he went on weighing peanuts and tea and spice.

We went out of the store utterly crushed. We stumbled along, holding tight to each other's hands and trying not to cry. Then we gave up and did cry, huddled together on the curbstone. People stopped and spoke to us, then went

on about their business. But one big man with a white mustache kept at us until he understood what the grief was about.

“You wait here,” he said. “I’ll go back and tell that clerk.” He took the hot handful of change and strode down the street. We waited. We waited quite a long time; but finally he came back, and sure enough he had four one-dollar bills.

“There,” he said, “and next time you girls pay attention.”

He scowled at us and walked away. We held the money, stunned with relief. Then suddenly our manners prodded us, and we ran after him.

“Please, sir, we ought to thank you.”

He glared down at us. “All right. And so now you’ve thanked me.”

“But our mother would want to thank you, too,” we said. “She’d probably like to write a little note and thank you.” Our mother was a great note writer.

“Not necessary at all.”

“But she wouldn’t like it,” we said. “She’d be pretty cross if we didn’t have your name, so she could.”

We insisted; he resisted. But finally, and very gruffly, he took out a crumpled paper and scribbled a name and address on it.

When we got home, we gave our mother the paper bag, and she looked in approvingly. Then she opened the big purse to count the change.

“Why, for pity’s sake,” she said, “this isn’t right!”

“Oh, yes,” we said, “it’s. . . .”

“Why there’s too much here! I gave you children only a one-dollar bill. This is change from a five.”

“But you said . .

“Yes, and then I said I’d better not trust you with it.”

So we explained, and we got out the slip with the address, and she said when supper was over we’d take the money back to the man with the white mustache. Our father himself would thank him.

“Such kind people there are in the world,” our mother said, after she had scolded us properly.

After supper we all put on our overshoes. Our father thought the paper said “Felix Zurich”; our mother said his name was “Felix Sunage.” But the address

at least was plain—439 Fourth Street. We hurried along. At Fourth Street we found no 439; the numbers ended at 325. We rang door-bells; we asked and asked. But there was no such address, and nobody ever heard of such a man.

We were all quiet, going home. Before he took off his overcoat, our father put the money on the mantel.

“It doesn’t belong to us,” he said. “We’ll leave it there awhile.”

It stayed there for days. We looked at it and thought of things we could buy with it for ourselves. After all, the man had given it to us. Timidly we mentioned it several times to our father.

“It doesn’t belong to us,” he said. “We’ll have to do something special with it.”

It stayed there for weeks.

“We’ll have to do something kind with it,” our mother said.

We all thought of things we could do with it. We proposed some of them.

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” our father said. “But as long as you thought of it, maybe you’d like to have it for your own kind deed.”

So we did our own kind deeds, and the stranger’s deed lay on the mantel.

It stayed there year after year. We did many things with it. But always when the moment came for us to reimburse ourselves, we somehow didn’t, and it stayed on, spent over and over.

When our mother dusted the mantel she often said, “There are such kind people in this world.” When visitors mentioned it and we told them about it, they, too, added it to themselves.

And it went on and on, and still goes on and on, I hope.

We Buy a Car—Almost

You can easily tell which house is ours when you look down our street; we're the people who usually have a beat-up jalopy standing in our drive.

Not that we own one . . . yet. But we're working at it. It's a long story, finance-wise (that know-how sounding term I'm always hearing in the conversation of people entirely at home in significant subjects! I'm trying to learn to use it myself, population-wise . . . procrastination-wise . . . calorie-wise . . . but on me the terms never look real).

Well, as I was saying . . . we've come to the car-buying business down a devious route, finance-wise. It got its start because Miss Boo suddenly decided to take a course in summer school instead of going to camp as usual. So commendable did this intention seem to me, I felt that in all fairness, she should be rewarded.

"As long as education has won out over recreation," I said, "I think you're entitled to the money that a month at camp would have cost."

"How much would that be?" she asked, evidently adjusting the gauge on her pleasure.

"A hundred and eighty dollars, dear. It'll be yours."

"To do what I *want* with?" she cried incredulously.

"Within reason," I said cautiously.

"Whose reason, for instance?"

"Well, I wouldn't want you to buy something fancy from the Thousand Oaks Circus Animal Farm."

"Natch not. I'm entirely reliable now," she agreed. Evidently she too was remembering the time she confidently expected to be given what she most wanted for Christmas . . . a lovely baby monkey.

"We'd open a savings account in your name," I said brightly.

"Oh, that!" she said morosely, "that wouldn't be like having it be my own."

"Of course it would. It would give you a feeling of independence and security."

"I have that already," she said gloomily, "and what good does it do me?

What can you do with ole independence and security?"

I chose not to venture out into that quagmire of a theme.

"Of course if I could draw out the money now and then."

"That's what having an account in your name implies," I said with dignity. "You can either draw it out and fritter it away, or you can let it sit there quietly getting fatter by the minute as the interest piles up."

"Sounds fine," she said, and I could see her doing mathematical gymnastics.

So the money was deposited and it sat and got fatter and fatter for about nineteen days.

Then she had an idea. You could see it fermenting in her the minute she appeared for breakfast.

"How'd you like to go into a partnership with me?" she suggested.

"What kind?"

"Well, how'd you like the two of us to buy a car together?"

"Do I need a car? I use the family car."

"Yes, of course. But this would be your own. Half of it anyway."

"That's a thought. What'd each of us have to contribute?"

"Well, I've got a hundred and eighty dollars, and a driver's license," she said. "You've probably got the rest of the money we'd have to have. Then besides, the nicest thing about you is that you never want to tell people how to drive, or how to get someplace."

"Oh, is that so?" I said, pleased that such a nice thing was nice about me.

"That's quite a consideration," she said. "Most grownups, especially women, always want to give directions. Especially if they don't know for sure."

"So we'd own the car together," I said, not giving any directions, but guiding us back on the route.

"That's the idea."

"I'll think it over."

"Of course, it would have to be a suitable car," she said.

"Such as what?" I asked, thinking of the Jaguars that zoom up and down

our street with an aura of arrogant extravagance around them.

"Well, we wouldn't want a fancy show-off car. I'd be embarrassed if we got something snobbish and new-looking."

"That's embarrassing?" I asked, willing to learn.

"That's what *we* consider it," she explained, invoking her contemporaries to support her opinion. "*We* like a nice casual car. Of course, *boys* our age think it's sharp to have something comical, maybe a T-model painted pink, with some gag printed on the door. 'This way out' or 'Walk, don't run to the nearest exit.' But that's *boys*. They'll get over it."

So we discussed the subject a bit farther, decided not to say anything to the rest of the family, smuggled the morning paper upstairs and read six or seven columns of advertisements, put through a few telephone calls, and eventually forgot all other normal activities while we searched for the one perfect vehicle.

Within a matter of hours, word got around among the used-car dealers, it seemed, and we were in business. Frenziedly in business. The house was convulsed with it; our telephone line was tied up, you couldn't get in or out of our driveway, and a strange assortment of car owners who wanted to dispose of their particular headache sat waiting in various rooms of our house to tell us their stories. Some were pretty ingenious; their wives were now pregnant, so they needed a more sedate car; their children had just married, and the only thing the new in-law brought into the family was another car just like this one; they were leaving our part of the country to take up work in the East; no place to park on their street, so they were buying a motorcycle. The prize reason for wanting to sell, I thought, should have gone to a man who said he now had a hernia, so he needed less frisky transportation.

In between interviews we dashed around to the car lots. All in all, we must have tried out and rejected three score and ten cars; anyway it *felt* like a lifetime to me.

And then the perfect one was brought to our door. It was painted robin's-egg blue, and had nice butter-colored seat covers. It was a convertible, but the owner frankly said that the buttons which were supposed to raise the top no longer worked. But that was all right; we don't have much rain in California.

We wanted to put a down-payment on it immediately, even though we had promised Jonesy, our trusted mechanic, that we wouldn't buy *anything* until he'd looked it over. But for some reason, the owner wouldn't take the money.

"You kids better think it over a little bit," he said, hoping to dazzle me, I suppose, by his bald-faced flattery.

“We have thought it over,” Boo said. “We’ll take it.”

“It’s against my principles to sell something without the buyer having plenty of time to think.”

“We don’t need time,” she said. “We’re trained to think fast.”

But still he wouldn’t get down to business, finance-wise.

“You’d better look around a little more,” he said. “How do you know the price is right? Anyway, you phone me this afternoon. Or better still, I’ll phone you.”

In spite of us, he drove away, and we could barely keep from running down the street after the beautiful pale blue thing, disappearing.

“I don’t understand the man,” Boo said. “He acted like he didn’t want to sell it after all.”

I didn’t understand him either. He acted as if he couldn’t get away from us fast enough. Needless to say, we didn’t wait until he telephoned us. We called him. His wife answered, a disgruntled-sounding woman. She didn’t beat around the bush. She came right out and dispelled the mystery.

“My husband doesn’t want to sell,” she said flatly.

“But why not?” Boo cried in indignation. “He took up our time.”

“I can’t help that,” she said. “But Bill says the car’s cuter than he thought it was. He says that as soon as he saw that little blonde in the driver’s seat. . . .”

“That’s silly,” Boo said.

“Sure it’s silly. But wait’ll you hear the rest. *Now* he’s trying to get me to go over to a beauty shop and have myself made into a blonde!”

The Escalator

Now that she was a woman who had *lived* (that is, who had had a genuine date which had kept her out until twelve-thirty) Boo took a much wider view of the world. A view, to be specific, which now included another sex.

A day or so earlier she used to say, “Oh, boys!” as one would throw a rock. Now she gave the same words a different reading. “Oh, boys?” she said and the word had two syllables, and was played on melodious little flute notes conveying all kinds of rich, wistful meaning.

To begin with, she told me confidentially that she had decided to “go steady.”

“With whom?” I asked apprehensively.

“Oh, I suppose I’ll have to begin with Winthrop Rawes,” she said resignedly. “I don’t know anybody else. Yet, that is.”

“But didn’t you meet other boys at the Prom?”

“Heavens no,” she said. “You’re not supposed to notice anybody else is there except the boy you’re dancing with.”

“You mean you had to dance all the dances with Winthrop?”

“Of course. He brought me, didn’t he?”

“I see,” I said dimly. “And now is he persuading you to go steady?”

“Oh no,” she said, all feminine. “He hasn’t thought of it yet. But he’ll think of it. Just give him time. A boy has more prestige if he’s going steady. And Winthrop just loves prestige. He uses the word.”

“Well, just to brief me on the customs of the day . . . what does going steady involve?”

“Oh, movies once in a while, and cokes after school. And sitting together at games. And if people happen to have classes near each other, they walk along the corridors together. They don’t have to talk. They just have to walk together.”

“Sounds like Siamese twins.”

“It is, in a way. But it gives you prestige.”

“So you said.”

“To tell you the truth, I wouldn’t *pick* Winthrop. But he’ll do.”

“Not a nice attitude.”

“Realistic. Also honest. Can’t you say out loud what you think inside?”

“Well, maybe you could think about some more favorable aspects of the situation.”

“For instance, that I owe him something?” she said trying to be fair. “He did get me started.” This attitude didn’t seem much of an improvement over the original standpoint, so I made no comment.

But she didn’t need any comment, being quite able to make her own. “You see, it’s like an escalator. When you’re just a girl you have to stand there doing nothing but *frustrating*, watching everybody else going up and up. But once a boy asks you to something, you’re on the escalator. Then it’s up to you to stay on.”

I tried to digest this graphic description, then I went back to the original announcement.

“So you’ve decided to go steady with Winthrop?”

“Until something better turns up,” she said. “Fact is, I saw something better at the Prom. Whatta guy! He’s a senior. I couldn’t expect him to look at me. But anyway. . . . It’s wonderful to know there *are* such people.” She drifted off in an age-old sigh. Then she got back to her realistic program.

“So . . . I’ll just go steady *temporarily*.”

Aunt Fay and the Men in My Life

When I was just past thirteen, Aunt Fay came to visit us. She was exactly what I was looking for, a porthole from our safe life which would give a terrifying view of what surrounded us. For I was a drama-starved child, ripe and honing for picturesque tragedy. I was almost overwhelmed in it that autumn, for through my Aunt Fay I nearly lost my father.

He was the sun of our private firmament; all our orbits circled around him willingly. He had an opinion on every subject; as far as we were concerned, they were absolutely correct. In his presence everything became fun. Everything except work, of course. For at thirteen I had heavy sluggish syrup in my bones so that even lying still was an effort. I had strength enough for everything except work. At the very thought of work I buckled at the knees. But laziness had to be a fugitive in my father's house; to say you were tired was worse than confessing theft.

From the time we were toddlers, his family had competed for his displays of affection. I was the healthy one who never "caught" anything, so I never saw his dear face bent anxiously above my bed. I used to pray to have a long illness, so my father would worry about me and bring home a half-pint of vanilla ice cream when he came from work. It sometimes happened to my little sister, but not to me. Anything that ever ailed *me* could be cured by a dose of hard work.

When my father opened the front door and gave his special little whistle, the very air sprang to life, and we all came running, throwing ourselves on him and demanding kisses.

We did exactly what he told us to do, about everything. Our only chance of exercising our own perilous judgment was not to be exposed to him at all. For if we came within sight of him, we were putty in his hands. And we loved being putty! My mother lived solely for him. His joy was hers, his slightest wish her own. And he would have said the same thing in reverse. "I want whatever Jet wants," he would say. "She's my boss."

This unanimity gave a wonderful feeling to us children, as if the universe were in perfect agreement with itself.

Into this Eden came my Aunt Fay. Armed to the teeth from birth. Hating men and envying them, she was nettled to a frenzy by the sight of man-and-

woman happiness. She was so allergic to it that she broke out in splotches of torment and wit.

My Aunt Fay was married to my father's brother Andrew. He had the size in the family; he was big and also handsome, with a golden wishbone-shaped mustache, a double chin and a militant pompadour. But behind that façade of ornate flesh, cowered a docile spirit.

He and Aunt Fay were destined for each other, as murderer and victim. Or, to be less grim about it, as ventriloquist and dummy. Aunt Fay demanded a handsome man to operate and humiliate, and Uncle Andrew was looking for a buxom knee on which to live a safe and supine life.

Although Aunt Fay quite frankly said she "had no use for men," there was still plenty of primitive female in her, so that she yearned to be throttled by some male. She lived on the edge of constant danger of such throttling; the fact that she could come so close without ever being touched is a tribute to the self-control of the sex she despised.

She often let it be known that she had brought to her marriage an inheritance. She had been quoted as saying, "Poor Andrew . . . he'd have had quite a different career if he hadn't married an heiress."

From the first hour of their visit in our house, our happiness was an outrage and a challenge to Aunt Fay. We were all pitifully vulnerable and she mowed us down right and left. We had been used to believing that relatives were people who liked you. This left us wide open to attack. At first we just couldn't believe our own wounds.

Just to get squared off during our first meal, she lashed out at each of us. "Good heavens, Jessie, why are you dressing that puny child in blue? Makes all the veins stand out in that pale, miserable face of hers," she said about my precious little sister. Before we could attempt a defense, she started on me.

"Sit up straight, child. Don't get round in the back before you get round in the front." I, who was beginning to be pretty conscious of my timidly rounding front, wilted with embarrassment.

My father said, "Fay, if you were one of my own children you'd have to leave the table for that kind of talk."

This was the matador's red cape to Aunt Fay. She whirled upon him and beamed delightedly. "Well, Willie!" she said with a horn thrust of laughter goring his tenderest spot. "You're quite a little man, aren't you?"

My father's face flamed with anger, for she had selected the one word

which had a sharp point for him. But our faces flamed even brighter, and my mother looked as if she would burst into tears. Nobody ever before had dared to call my father by the patronizing diminutive. My mother called him Will, and it had almost deific implications in the name. He was her Will . . . will incarnate.

Aunt Fay went on. “Let’s get this straight at the start, shall we? I’m *not* one of your obedient little women, Willie. You’ve made quite a little kingdom here, but I’m afraid you’ll never find *me* curtsying to you.”

Uncle Andrew, glad of a diversionary attack, cackled encouragingly. Anticipation like cream spread over the oatmeal of his expression. He was going to enjoy his visit to the hilt.

“You tell him off, Fay,” he cried, shivering with the excitement of danger. “W.B.’s never had any woman tell him off before.”

Neither of the adversaries so much as glanced at him. My father was cutting his meat fiercely. His strategy was badly hamstrung because he was the host at this table, but at last he did permit himself to say, “Well, Fay, it might give you a real experience to find yourself curtsying to *something* for once.”

“Not me,” Aunt Fay said. “I’ve been independent since the day I was born.”

“Independent?” My father tested the fabric of the word, and in his face you could see him saying to himself, “Hmmn . . . the stuff’s heavy tweed, and a woman should wear silk.” Then aloud he said, “I never thought independence was very becoming on a woman. Besides, it’s lonely.”

“Nonsense,” she said, and now it was her face which flamed. You could see her fumbling frantically for something to turn back the thrust. “You’ve got away with murder, Willie. But these females of yours will get on to you one of these days. The girls will, anyway. Jessie’s always been too much in love with you to have an ounce of sense.”

“Now Fay,” my mother protested feebly, trying to draw the fire away from my father. “I guess I just can’t help it.”

That meal marked the first bout, and it ended in a draw. Neither my Aunt Fay nor my father had shown the full fierceness of the fight that was waiting between them.

Throughout the next days the battle went on. My father was always at a disadvantage because he had a basic instinct that it is unthinkable to strike back at a woman even when she is trying to push in a man’s teeth. He couldn’t

help pulling his punches, which were usually in defense of someone other than himself. For instance, when Aunt Fay was belittling Uncle Andrew by lavish intimation about her inheritance, my father said, “Fay, since you mention the inheritance so often, I assume you’d like to talk frankly about it.”

“Why what do you mean!”

“Well, I mean maybe you’d like to be definite about the situation. I’ve heard about your inheritance ever since Andrew married you. Seems he’s never been able to do anything without being bolstered up by that money of yours.”

Uncle Andrew looked ready to faint. “Well, W.B., it did help me at first. The time I bought that laundry. Fay gave me a few hundred dollars. . . .”

“*Which* you promptly lost,” Aunt Fay said witheringly.

“Which I lost,” Uncle Andrew amended meekly.

“Then how about the money I lent you to buy into that sugar beet business? What became of that, I’d like to know?”

My father, enjoying his brief inning, said, “Never mind what became of the money, Fay. I’d like to hear just how much of a fortune it was.” It was a remark so far from my father’s customary courtesy that it showed his utter desperation.

In the silence that blotted out everything else, you could have heard a handkerchief fall. And indeed you did hear it, for my mother frantically tried to furnish a saving diversion.

“Will dear, I’ve dropped my handkerchief,” she said faintly. But for once my father was deaf to her.

For Uncle Andrew, probably for the first time in his life, was daring to talk back about Aunt Fay’s money.

“I’ll tell you how big it was, W.B.,” he cried, looking white around the mouth. “It was just big enough to ruin my life.”

Aunt Fay’s face was seething with anger, and her eyes were whittled down to sharp points of hatred. “What a fine spectacle of gratitude *that* is!” she cried.

Now that Uncle Andrew had opened an inch of recklessness, the dam within him broke with a roar. He said with terrible deliberateness, “Fay’s Ma left her just under five thousand dollars, a diamond ring, and a piano. She lost the diamond ring in the washroom of a theater. The piano made the neighbors so mad that somebody set fire to our house. And the money . . . well, she’s still

got a few hundred which she holds over my head all the time."

Aunt Fay said with deadly quietness, "So *you've* fallen under the spell of that domineering little tyrant . . . that . . . that. . . ."

Her fury ricocheted off her husband insultingly. He wasn't worth getting into a first-class rage over. My father was the real adversary, the triumphant embodiment of all the maleness which she detested.

So Aunt Fay said explosively to him, "I'll thank you to leave Andrew out of this. *You're* the one! You're so spoiled by these simpering little ninnies of yours that you're unbearable!"

My father bowed his head in mock meekness. "Thank you, Fay, I call it a real compliment when you say my girls love me enough to spoil me."

"Love you!" Aunt Fay sniffed. "The children are scared to death of you, and Jessie's been in a trance since the first time you looked at her."

Then into her eyes came a new gleam, for in that moment she saw her most effective strategy. She could never get the best of my father by scoffing at him. There was a better way of getting even with him for being a man. So in that moment, the battle went underground. Far underground, where it struck its blows through a child's defenseless heart. Mine.

The next morning Aunt Fay got up for breakfast, and there couldn't have been a more charming companion. She asked my father about his work in a flattering way; she complimented my mother on her morning prettiness.

"We relatives ought to stick together," she said. "You know I've nobody of my own except you dear people."

My father was quite undone by this change in her. When he got up to leave the table he touched her shoulder timidly. Aunt Fay quivered under his affectionate touch, then said, "Bye-bye, Willie. Have a fine day."

My father left his hand on her shoulder a moment. "I think I ought to apologize to you, Fay. I got off on the wrong foot with you. Fact is, I guess I kind of forget you're a woman, because you play rougher than any woman I've ever known."

For a moment she wavered, unable to decide whether this was a declaration of peace, or a further attack. Then she put up her hand and gave my father's arm a shy pat.

My mother's eyes were misty with relief. Plainly she knew the lovableness of her Will had finally won over this peculiar sister-in-law. She knew no

woman in her right mind could resist him for long. . . .

The day continued as it had started. Aunt Fay announced she was going to kidnap me and take me to luncheon and a matinee. I had never been to a matinee in my life, and I'd been "downtown to lunch" only twice. My mother was as pleased as I was.

It was a baffling day. My Aunt Fay was witty and disarming. She made me feel this was not woman and child on naïve holiday, but experienced contemporaries passing the time pleasantly. She let it be understood that from the first she had recognized me as the only worldly-wise member of my family. The moment she said it, I realized with dazzling joy that it was true.

She intimated that only shocking blindness kept my parents from appreciating me. Now that I thought of it, I quite agreed with her. My father especially, she said. How could I stand it, the way he made fun of all my best attempts to improve conditions around me?

Well, it did grieve me, I admitted. And that insulting nickname he called me. *Mugsie!* Didn't my friends tease me about it? Or perhaps I never brought them home so they could *see*?

The way he ordered me about as if I were a child . . . the menial chores, like lugging the wood upstairs for the fireplace in the sitting room. Aunt Fay really admired the way I didn't throw the wood in his face. A big strong man like my father asking a frail young woman like me. . . .

She didn't make a frontal attack on my father; that would have brought out defense. Instead she flattered and sympathized with me, weaving bonds which lashed me to her. I was enraptured. She bought me a green velveteen suit, very grown-up in cut. Just the thing to get me started right in high school in a few weeks.

"That is, if you don't blow up and run away or something before school opens!" she said laughingly.

I saw for the first time that my father was a strong-willed villain who had ruined my mother's life. I saw my father for what he was, a strutting little male, getting his way in everything. It was as much of a shock to me as it must have been to Adam and Eve to discover they were naked. I had thought we were living in a happy home, and all the time we were miserable, without ever suspecting it!

The climax of all this disillusionment came the next night at dinner. My father, telling an anecdote said, "It was him all right."

I said icily, “Father, please!”

“What’s the matter, Mugsie? Bad grammar?”

“My name’s Margaret, if you don’t mind,” I said bitterly.

After dinner he said, “Princess Margaret, how about some wood upstairs? It’s chilly tonight.” He rubbed his hands together with crude good humor, and I gritted my teeth and stamped down the basement stairs.

“So help me, this is the last time,” I said to myself. “I’m only giving in because we have company.”

I dragged the wood in its canvas carrier noisily up the basement stairs. My father and Aunt Fay were talking in the hall, in loud jolly tones.

“Pardon me, please,” I said with ironic politeness, shoving between them with my degrading load.

“Certainly, Mugsie!” my father said, bending low. Just as our eyes passed each other, he winked. That infuriated me, for his eyes were full of laughter.

I could feel the adult gazes following me upstairs; I knew they were watching my bulging calves, which were not my best point. I felt my father laughing at my rebellion, but I also felt Aunt Fay encouraging me.

At the landing I turned and looked down, and my father said, “Did I call you Mugsie? Forgive that. I should have said ‘Your Highness.’ ”

Something in me broke then, a combination of shame and whipped-up bewilderment, and loyalties attempting violent suicide.

“I don’t care what you call me,” I said angrily. “I don’t care what you do to me. I’m going to run away from here just as soon as I can. Then you can carry your own heavy old wood upstairs.” Before I quite realized what I was doing, I had let loose of one strap of the carrier, and the whole load went rolling down the steps, bouncing thunderously and gouging the wallpaper.

Somehow then I was crying, and the three of us were gazing at the havoc. I expected my father would come bounding up the stairs and give me a good sound spanking.

But he did nothing of the kind. He looked from me to Aunt Fay. Then with deliberation he put one foot on the lowest step, and over his raised knee he managed somehow to bend the formidable torso of Aunt Fay. Then, not too gently, he gave *her* the spanking. At first she tried to believe it was one of his crude jokes.

But he said, “You’ve had this coming for years, woman. If nobody else

will do it, I guess I'll have to."

She let out strange cries and yelps, half horror and half delight. There was nobody to save the situation, for my mother had stepped over to a neighbor's. Uncle Andrew, who was having his usual nap after dinner, came running to the parlor door. When he saw what was happening he said, "Now W.B. . . . you can't do a thing like that. . . ." Then he began to laugh, with a bellow that must have echoed throughout the whole street.

I myself was crying hysterically. Everyone had forgotten I was the cause of the trouble. I ran from the scene of devastation to my room, and shut the door. Now Aunt Fay would surely leave us. I would lose my only friend, the only person on earth who appreciated me. I fell into bed sobbing. Nobody came near my room, and after a long while I fell asleep.

From a dream I roused up because my mother was taking off my clothes. "Don't wake up, darling," she said. "You've had a hard day, haven't you?"

Nobody called me in the morning, and when I woke up I was miraculously ill. Nothing serious, only a bad sore throat which gave me a pathetic little voice and made me interestingly flushed. Aunt Fay and Uncle Andrew had taken an early train, my mother said, her eye so innocent I felt sure she hadn't heard about the spanking. . . .

I had my luncheon in bed, and all afternoon I lay under the blanket, trying not to think. Everything in my world had collapsed, and it would be years before I would be a real woman able to cope with my own destiny.

In the late afternoon, with the house deliciously fragrant from a cake and a meatloaf in the oven, my mother came and sat beside my bed, sewing. We didn't talk about anything much. I just let the comfort of her serenity soak into my bruises. When she got up to set the table, she leaned over my bed and looked into my eyes. She put both her warm hands around my cheeks.

"It's not hard to be a woman, darling," she said. "It feels strange at first. But there's nothing better you ever could be."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I closed my eyes and let two tears leak out from under my eyelids. Thoughtfully my mother bent down and kissed me. Then in her light and gentle way she said something which I never would forget.

"There's only one kind of woman who has a bad time of it," she said. "That's a woman who wants to belittle men. A woman who is against men has the loneliest time on earth."

With that one light finger touch she put a mark on my life which set the design of it as long as it will last.

She closed my door, and I lay there and let her words explain themselves in my mind. I saw my Aunt Fay's face, tight and alert with hostility. And I saw my mother's face, soft and pleased with life, gentleness written in every line, love that would not knowingly hurt any creature, large or small. One face was angry and starved, and the other filled with the rich delights of being a woman who knew her estate. One was convulsed with trying to prove some point; the other never needed to prove anything, for it was all self-evident.

I must have fallen asleep, for when I heard a noise and opened my eyes the windows were violet and the room was nearly dark. The door was pushing open and my father's face was peering around the edge almost timidly. I said nothing to welcome him, but my heart was unclenched like a hand opening to take a treasure.

He came over to the bed and looked down at me. "Who's that hiding under the covers?" he said, as he used to say when I was four, and seven, and sometimes even when I was ten.

"It's me," I said. "It's Mugsie."

He didn't say anything for a moment, then he whispered, "I could call you Margaret, if you wanted me to."

My opened heart spilled light throughout my body, for there was more than a heart could hold.

"Not yet," I said. "You better wait until I'm grown up. I'm still just your little girl."

"Just my little girl," he said thoughtfully. "That's okay for a long time yet."

I reached for his hand and held it tight against my cheek, and it didn't matter at all if tears splashed on it, for this was my father's safe and wonderful hand. There was a cold square of a box in his hand, and it smelled deliciously of vanilla.

"I thought I'd lost you, Mugsie," he said.

"I thought I'd lost you, too."

But I had not lost him. My mother had helped me safely over a dark abyss so that I never could lose my father. And because of that, I did not lose the other men who came through the years and made my life beloved and merry and rich.

Off-Color

It is a sobering catastrophe when you detect a flaw in a friend you believed was perfect. Years finally make you a bit resilient in this crisis, but Boo hasn't been worked on by too many years as yet.

I suspected something was wrong the moment she came in the house before dinner. It had been a day much anticipated. She was on a specially chosen committee of four public-spirited members of the Good Citizenship Club. Their assignment was to go to our airport to welcome a high school student arriving from Australia to be a delegate at a Youth Congress in New York.

Felicity was the other girl on the committee and there were two boys. This neat balancing in itself was enough to make the occasion delightful. Felicity naturally had selected what she and Boo would wear. This was no simple decision; it required long daily telephone conferences for a week before the day arrived. First, Felicity thought they should look very sophisticated. "After all, we'll be the first actual American girls he'll see. First impressions, you know."

Boo wasn't very sure she could look sophisticated, but she was willing to try. "I could wear my heels," she said doubtfully. "But they don't seem quite right for an airport."

"I'll let you know about that," Felicity said.

One day they were to be pony-tailed; the next day Felicity wanted new haircuts, very short and Continental looking. One day they were to wear gloves, and the next Felicity thought they'd better embody California informality. Only more so.

"I think we've got to be either stinking with style, or else real casual," Felicity decreed.

"You don't mean boys' shirts with the tails out?" Boo asked in horror.

"Possibly," Felicity said, and you could almost hear her considering how piquant are the twin melons of her neat little derrière, unexpectedly apparent in the boys' shirt motif.

The Good Citizenship Club had appropriated funds so that they could take the Australian delegate for a snack in the coffee shop. That would give them a chance to get acquainted before the adult hostess, who was to provide an

overnight view of an American family, would arrive and spoil everything.

It should have been a lot of fun. But somehow it wasn't. Boo came into the house on dragging feet. I heard the feet but I called out cheerily, "How'd it go?"

"How'd what go?" she asked with that perverse obtuseness that a teen-ager uses so maddeningly to ward off intrusion into privacy.

"Why, meeting the delegate, of course," I said.

"Oh, that! All right, I suppose."

"Why, darling . . . I thought. . . ."

"Oh, *please*," she said impatiently. "Everything that happens has to be beat to death in this house. Talk, talk, talk . . . that's all we have around here!"

So I knew it had been literally unspeakable. I warned the rest of the family, and we ate dinner discussing national politics. The silence around Boo was thunderous.

Usually she breaks down after a half-hour or so, when anything is troubling her, for she is a serene child who doesn't cherish her troubles as some of us do. But tonight she dried the dishes in silence, and if she spoke at all it was only a weary, "Oh, I suppose so," or a noncommittal "Okay."

She went upstairs to study, and I knew homework would have a bad time of it. At nine o'clock, as is our custom, I brought up what we call the "midnight snack," usually milk and graham crackers, or the last piece of the pie.

"Just put it somewhere," she said without looking at me. "I'm not very hungry."

"Is something worrying you?" I asked, as if I had just noticed it.

"Not particularly," she said.

"Don't you feel well, dear?"

"I feel okay."

"Did Felicity enjoy herself?"

She considered snubbing me for the question, and then she burst out angrily, "Felicity! *She* was practically hysterical."

Then it came tumbling out. "The boy from Australia wasn't much of a mixer. I guess they must have picked him because he was a brain. Anyway he

couldn't think of anything to say. And when one person can't, then nobody can. So we all just kind of congealed. We goggled at each other, and couldn't think of a *thing*."

"Not even Felicity?"

"Oh sure, Felicity finally thought of something all right." Her voice was razor-edged with sarcasm now, made sharper by her adoration of Felicity. "*She* finally thought of an off-color story."

"I see," I said, trying not to let my horror show. The fact was, I didn't suspect that Boo even knew the term.

"Very far off?" I asked stupidly.

She nodded in misery. "What will he *think*? Felicity herself said that his first impression of American kids was pretty important."

I tried to think of some comfort to offer. "Well, maybe he didn't know it was off-color," I suggested. "Maybe he didn't get the point."

Boo shook her head. "He guffawed," she said. "In case you're not familiar with the verb, it means he laughed so loud everybody looked at us. It was the only time he opened his mouth, except to eat." She threw back her head and gave a gloomy imitation of the Aussie guffawing. "Everybody was embarrassed. Except Felicity."

Then my curiosity got the best of me. "What *was* the story," I asked unguardedly. "Could you tell it to me? Maybe it's not as bad as you think it is."

"Oh, it's off-color, all right," she said. So then she told it. "Seems it was Christmas Eve, and three little lady cats were sitting before a fireplace talking about what they wanted for Christmas. The first one said, 'Know what I'd like? A nice little blue-eyed kitten with pretty little white paws.'

"The second one said, 'Well, what I want is *two* sweet little baby kittens, with pointed ears.'

"So the third one said, 'As long as you're dreaming, why not dream big? I'd like to have *three* little kittens, with curly tails and nice whiskers.'

"Just then an old tomcat was walking along the roof. So he leaned over the chimney and called down, 'Watch out, girls! Here comes Santa Claus.' "

To her surprise, the telling of the story cheered her considerably. When she finished it, her eyes were sparkling and her mouth, so lately sad, gave up trying not to smile. She put her head on her desk and shook with laughter.

I said, “Well, it could have been worse.”

“But don’t you realize,” she said sternly, “we’re too young to know what it meant. In *mixed company* anyway.”

Feesh

We're not by nature fishermen. But because we now live in California, we *are* by nature hosts. For very soon after you acquire a permanent California address you realize that Horace Greeley's advice, "Go west, young man," is still ringing down the centuries, heeded by all and sundry. Sooner or later everyone (including our New York dentist) checks in, hoping transparently to be invited at least to luncheon, and at best to occupy the guest room. California architects have become wary now, and recommend that in the new, ideal, functional houses no guest room should be provided.

Eventually a couple we just loved in the East arrived. In New York City we had no way of finding out that they adored fishing. But our first hour together here, revealed the fact.

"Dave's just mad to go deep-sea fishing," Elaine said.

"Albacore," Dave explained in rapture.

So we could do no less than get up a party. And when I say "get up" that's precisely what I mean, for we had to rise at 3 A.M., drive chilled through the night to Malibu, meet ghostily with characters we scarcely recognized in their fishing clothes, and be out where the Albacore gather, before the sun was up. Dave had gear in abundance to lend our family, and nothing I could say kept him from rigging up one of his best pieces of equipment for me. I knew gloomily that somehow I'd either break it or lose it, or both, and I had a feeling that no matter what I would do to try to make up for the mishap, our beautiful friendship would be damaged.

The large commercial fishing boat would have been fun except for the fishing. Besides our party there were about twelve experienced fishermen, each with a lump in his hip pocket which was lunch, and liquid refreshment. The skipper was a wordless expert, and the crew was a copper-blond giant, who plays in Westerns between fishing trips. The crew took one look at me, and said, "Don't worry about anything. I'll do the baiting for *you*."

As soon as the engines started, the crew collected a dollar from everyone who wanted to go in on the jackpot. I knew I was throwing my dollar down the drain, but there wasn't much choice. So I took off my borrowed leather gloves, snatched the opportunity to dab the sniffles from my nose, and got a dollar bill out of the all-too-snug hip pockets of my Levis.

We chugged out into the darkness, and just as pearly streaks were

beginning to crack the surface of the sky, we came up alongside another boat.

"What's this?" I asked.

"We get the chums here . . . fish, you know." For a happy moment I thought we were going to buy our catch, and then just enjoy a sea trip. But of course it was the bait boat.

Several bushels of chums were ladled into our bait tank, a few sportsmanly remarks were shouted back and forth between us and the bait boat, then we were off again.

This is not an account of a fishing trip, so I'll skip past the next four hours (as I was not able to do in fact), merely listing the items . . . the gutteral mutterings of the absorbed fishermen, the choreography of snarl between me and my line, constantly shaping and reshaping in large and more intricate patterns, the cumulus clouds of nausea floating up from my stomach, my dread of what would happen when one of our companions got out his lunch and unwrapped it before my eyes, the slapping of the caught fish six inches past my horrified face . . . and finally my own delirium when *I* began to catch. The frenzy of greed that possessed me . . . my reckless bout with the chum as I forgot all squeamishness and tried to bait my own hook . . . and suddenly the noonday sun beating down on salt-sprayed skin. It was an unforgettable morning made up of revulsion and delight, of physical unwillingness and atavistic lust.

Albacore weren't biting . . . but sea bass were; also a few plebeian mackerel and groupers. Biting and gamy. Which was the reason I broke Dave's expensive reel . . . the first one, that is. The second accident, when I dropped the whole thing into the sea was really the fault of a gull who looked as if he were going to attack me over possession of my chum.

When the boat turned around and began wallowing toward home, I was the one who got sulky because we had to take the sissy landlubbers back to shore, as per agreement.

The skipper and the crew weighed in the individual catches, and the jackpot went to a small Mexican chiropractor, who probably was the master of special grips denied to us laymen. Some of the fishermen had their catches expertly cleaned and filleted. But we carried ours home with heads and tails on, because that way they looked more like genuinely caught fish.

We had twenty-two pounds of them going to our house, and when someone suggested we'd better call up friends and offer them fish, I was shocked. Give away our own privately caught fish? If anybody insisted on making fish gifts

to friends and neighbors, the Farmers' Market would oblige.

"They'll be utterly delicious for tonight's dinner," I said. "Wonderful brain food. We ought to get on some quiz program tomorrow. . . ."

But we reckoned without Tumpti. He took one look at the catch, and appropriated it.

"I fix," he said.

"Naturally. Cook up *plenty*," I said.

He looked at me in disgust. "Ham tonight," he said firmly. "I make salt feesh for later. Ver' good."

The guests expected me to take command of the situation. But the rest of us knew that if Tumpti said salt fish for later, that's what it would be.

He sent Dave out to buy a special stone crock . . . T'lee gallons. Also salt. Not civilized salt packaged in neat cylinders, but big white bags of biting salt which could be found only on the wharf at Santa Monica.

Meantime he cleaned fish. After dinner, he turned on the garden lights, and set himself up tidily in business, working in sharp illumination far into the night, while a ring of us and neighbor cats were held at bay by his expression and the gleam of his knife.

The next day I dared to ask, "Tumpti, when can we eat the salt fish?"

"Plitty soon. You be ve'y glad. Salt feesh ve'y good."

So we waited. Dave and Elaine extended their visit a few days hopefully. But they finally had to give up. "Maybe we can send you a few by air mail," we promised doubtfully, knowing that Tumpti would be in charge of the supply and would dole it out as he saw fit.

He kept the big crock down in our dungeon-like basement, safe from cats, us and other unspecified marauders. He did let us go down with him and look at it once.

"Two, thlee weeks now," he said happily. So we waited, our salivary glands going mad every time we thought of the fish.

Now plenty of time had passed, and we told each other we just ought to be firm. Nothing had been said about the fish for nearly a week. Maybe he had forgotten them entirely. After all, he was a pretty old man.

As usual, the being firm fell to me.

"Think no more of it," I promised. "Tomorrow I'll just *tell* him we expect

the fish for dinner."

Early in the morning I went out boldly to his domain.

"Now . . . about dinner," I said. "We'll have the fish tonight, Tumpti.

"Today not Fliday," he said sullenly. "No good feesh in market."

"We don't need the market," I said faintly. "I'm talking about our *own* fish . . . in the basement."

He looked at me with steel mildness in his eyes. He set his little toothless jaw.

"Feesh?" he asked in a rasping voice. "What feesh?"

So then I knew the worst.

Salt had come to grips with the forces of nature. But nature had carried out her irresistible cycles of deterioration, unheeding all human efforts to interfere.

One Search Ends, Another Begins

The search kept up.

Boo's friends now knew that she was in the market for a car, and that widened the horizon of possibility by cousins, neighbors, and occasionally (if the girl felt well enough entrenched) by a boy friend. Seemed as if everybody knew somebody who wanted to sell a car.

In between looking at the cars, Boo looked at her bank book. Occasionally she dallied with the delicious possibilities of other things besides cars which a hundred and eighty dollars would buy. A piece of make-believe, almost-not-quite mink, for instance.

"You're too young for fur," I said sternly. "Besides, this is California."

She looked at jewelry. She even went into the hushed sanctuary of our most expensive shop and asked to see some nice modest lady-like pearls. Or even diamonds. . . .

There was a girl from Denmark in her high school class who was said to have had an operation which improved the shape of her nose. Boo went over all her own features to see where transformations might be worth a hundred and eighty dollars.

It was a nerve-wracking period for all of us. For a little money, like a little learning, is a dangerous thing.

I even presented the stock market to her. I was careful to do my explaining in private, because my knowledge is more inspirational than factual, and this was no moment for ridicule from eavesdroppers. She listened to my come-on quite soberly, and I thought perhaps I had succeeded in getting the money out of harm's way.

"You could buy some lovely stock," I said. "While a car bought with the same money would just be depreciating before your very eyes, the stock would be getting better and better."

"I'm not interested," she said. "Money is for old folks. Young people like the stuff money will buy."

So we went on dizzily exploring the stuff money will buy. Especially on four wheels.

Then suddenly the search was over. I could scarcely believe what I was

hearing when she answered the telephone and said wearily, “I’m sorry, sir. I’m not buying a car just now.”

As soon as she put up the phone, I cried breathlessly, “You’re *not*?”

“Not what?”

“Not buying a car!”

“Nope.”

“How’d you reach that conclusion?”

“I made a big discovery.”

“That’s fine,” I said, not caring what the discovery was, just so it was doing what it seemed to be doing.

“It’s about sex,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Yep. I found out something.”

“What on earth?” I said, trying not to sound too apprehensive.

“Which would you rather do . . . own a car, or have a boy drive you around in *his*?”

As simple as that. But it’s pretty profound, after all. And if she can just remember the discovery and let it take over, I think she’s going to have a pretty good time out of life, woman-wise.

“Okay?” she asked.

“Entirely okay,” I agreed.

So now we still have jalopies cluttering up the driveway, making the whole street look rakish. But there’s variety in the clutter, here today and gone tomorrow, each replaced by another just as dilapidated. But that’s the way we like it.

Take Time by the Tail

I went to see some early American clothes in a museum. A sobering experience, for somebody who fastens loose buttons with a safety pin on the wrong side of the material, and who lives in nylon. In the exhibit were miles of ruffles on petticoats, each edged with handmade tatting. Some woman sewed on every inch by hand, and she also made soap and candles, and bread, then spent the afternoons driving behind a team of horses, on long leisurely calls from house to house.

They were just better women than we are.

We are knee-deep in labor-saving devices and ready-mixed food, and we haven't a minute to spare. With all the complex abundance we endure, we have one crying shortage . . . *time*. The most common plaint you hear nowadays is, "I just haven't time . . . I'd love to do it, if I had the time. . . ."

So I began to study time a little, to find out what kind of commodity it actually is. Gradually a rebellion rose up within me, for I realized that most of us have time for necessity but not for delight.

Time, it seemed to me, is a tyrant who admits duties, obligations, and bores into its presence, but banishes as many of the frisky pleasures as possible. Time usually strains out the camels and swallows the gnats. For most of us dutifully waste the best parts of our time on things we wish we didn't have to do.

I announced my discovery to the family with the smugness that usually accompanies such declarations.

"Don't anybody count on me on any Tuesday evenings from now on," I said. "I'm taking one evening a week to do nothing except what I enjoy."

They said with sarcastic sympathy, "What a dismal life you lead, you poor dear."

"Okay. But on Tuesday night I'm nobody's business. I'm going to paint, or read some old books I never have time for, or do up some preserves, or maybe just sit and stare into space."

"That's what I like to do," Boo said. "I love to just sit and frustrate."

And when Tuesday came, that's about what I did. The evening was all worn out from the day just spent. My attention was a ragbag, a bowl of

mincemeat, a shattering yarn.

Boo said with masterly simplicity, “The trouble with your free evening is that it comes at the wrong end of the day. Why not have your evening in the morning?”

So that’s what I did. And that’s how I discovered on the clock a big jackpot of time . . . three extra hours a day. In eight days it adds up to an extra twenty-four-hour day. In a year it amounts to much more than a month . . . nice fresh hours that nobody has yet fingermarked . . . rich hours dehydrated of all perverse interruptions and distractions . . . private hours mailed special delivery from eternity itself.

Naturally, you couldn’t waste such untarnished time on anything but work. So inadvertently I found that my rebellion had rebelled against me. Time had got the best of me again.

So, filled with self-righteousness, I now got up at five o’clock and plunged into work in a whisper so the rest of the house wouldn’t be disturbed. I had to huddle in a warm robe because heat hadn’t got up yet. Seems as if nobody else in the world is awake except some birds with insomnia. There is a lovely novelty about the familiar houses across the street, for at this hour the light is a splash of level sunshine and the shadows all point west instead of east.

After I got accustomed to the new light-angle outside, I discovered new light-angles in me. I found curiosity is livelier in the early morning; appreciation keener, and the windowpane that seems to divide one’s own small thinking from the lucid effortless light of Mind is more transparent. There’s elated voluntariness and a rush of thinking outward to meet what’s new. The mind . . . even a lazybone’s mind like the one I know best . . . is an athlete in the morning, performing out of sheer joy in strength. It’s hardly recognizable as the heavily fed sulky servant who does only what it must.

I wanted to tell everybody what I’d discovered. And for a few days I did just that, making a bore of myself. Then, for the thousandth time I conceded again that the best things in life are secret. And must stay that way, until we find them for ourselves. But we never give up trying to put up our fine discoveries in patent medicine bottles and passing them out for free.

I wanted to say, “Listen, honey . . . you’re wasting your early morning thinking on routine stuff! You’re throwing away your best on matters that concern the ‘creature’ and his tiresome maintenance . . . his bath, his clothes, his trek through town. Your keenest blade of the mind is hacking through dull tedium.”

Nobody can measure an early morning hour. It's not just the length of four fifteen-minute radio programs. One reason it's so big is that you apply yourself immediately, knowing nothing is going to save you, no phone, no doorbell, no pleasant aimless conversation. You rose up to work and you plunge right in. Nobody, it goes without saying, would dawdle or doodle at five o'clock in the morning.

People said to me, grumblingly, "What's the matter with you anyway? What makes *you* so doggoned cheerful?"

That was the problem, all right. You have to dim your exuberance because the sight of anybody with work done and self-respect under the belt is infuriating to people just out of bed. You must speak gently so you won't rile the invalids suffering from the malady of being-too-busy-to-be-human.

You refrain from making the speech that wants to be said. "Listen, sleep is often a symptom of boredom. Don't you remember? People in love . . . with each other or with life . . . don't require much sleep. . . ."

You dare not say any of it. And if you yawn . . . as you do about eleven o'clock . . . you do it with a polite pardon-me.

And that, matter of fact, is one of the many advantages of the system. You have a perfectly legitimate right to an afternoon nap. If anybody questions, you can mention Thomas Edison, and give the impression you're inventing a new kind of light bulb. And perhaps, you really are!

Real Live Money

Now that Boo had made her big discovery about money, I thought we'd better go on with the education.

We would now venture into the chapter called "Money and Clothes."

We have passed through that period when the question of clothes was "*Must* I put on something else? Comp'ny won't care. Nobody looks at a child . . . except to make improvements, of course."

"*I* look at you. And I think you're perfect . . . practically," I used to say gently. "But today let's have a kind of dress rehearsal for when you become . . . well, civilized."

"Okay," she used to say dolefully, "but can I wear blue-jeans?"

We *have* now become civilized as far as clothes are concerned. It is a fearsome state. The clothes question which used to be an unwelcome foundling on our doorstep has become the honored guest in our house. It has first place. Boo comes down late to breakfast looking pale from trying to decide which pearls, the large or the small, should go with the sweater . . . or do I like the silver chain with the elephant?

"Give me your undivided attention," she pleads.

"I have only one kind," I say. "One-piece."

"No comedy, please. Now look . . . *this* . . . or *this*?" She holds up each ornament in breathless suspense. If I can't make up my mind instantly, with good substantiating reasons, we have to go through it several times. The same mountainous importance, naturally, is given to shoes, to scarf, to handkerchief-in-pocket-or-out. Life is a complex business.

And shopping, up to the time of my *invention*, was delicious agony. Every item in her size was tried on thoughtfully and courteously. She could have closed her eyes and picked at random. After all, how can anything be unbecoming when one has blue eyes and golden hair, and every ounce is accounted for (and if an alien ounce sneaks in on the morning scales, it is routed by night like a pickpocket in Utopia).

But to her, and to all her friends, there are hundreds of shades of difference between the one perfect swim suit or sweater, and all the others on earth.

Sometimes if *two* utterly perfects appear we strike a crisis. "It would save

you a shopping trip later," she says, always considerate, "and if you say so, I'll just hang the extra one in the closet and not wear it until you say I definitely need a new one. Okay?"

We have been known to be guilty of three when we went to buy one. These were the Saturdays when she said, "Wasn't our luck absolutely *fab* today! I just love to shop with you, darling."

If we took a kibitzer on the trip, we naturally had to buy a little souvenir for her. Not a major item, of course. But a blouse she adored, or a handbag like Boo's, only in green. "It seems so selfish not to think of someone else," Boo always says afterwards. "You wouldn't want me to be selfish, I'm sure."

In spite of all this she never had a thing to wear. None of them have. When an occasion arises everyone phones everyone else and discusses the problem at length. I hear her saying, "But I haven't a thing, Felicity . . . absolutely nothing. My closet looks like Old Mother Hubbard. Speaking of O.M.H., I suppose Connie will wear that *bag* her mother brought her from Paris." Poor Connie, her mother selects her clothes.

But a while ago, everything changed in our house. Because I had an inspiration, so stunning and so wonder-working that I felt as if it should be marked "Pat. pending."

Next time the despotic subject of clothes came up, which it did within the hour, I was ready with my invention.

"Speaking of clothes . . . we're going to work on a new system."

"Oh? Something loathsome and sound, I expect."

"No. I think you're going to like it."

"So? Tell."

"I've figured out how much we spend for your clothes in a year. Hereafter we're going to give it to you in monthly installments."

"You mean real live *money*?" she uttered the electric word in a whisper.

"I don't mean hay," I said, aiming at her language and missing it by a year or two.

"Gosh," she looked starry-eyed with awe, and found nothing to say for quite a while. "You mean I'll handle actual money! In amounts you can see with the naked eye."

"The thing is, you've got to plan your spending," I said. "If you know you're going to need a large item . . . say a winter coat, you'll have to go

lightly on buying, to be ready for it. If I were you I should draw up a yearly budget."

"Now, please," she said politely, "if I'm going to manage it, I'd better do it."

"It will give you fine experience, so when you have your own family." Right there was where I made my big mistake. For when we talk about her family of the future this present always fades into dwarfed insignificance. "My husband will be proud of the way I handle his money," she said with that lovely guilelessness which her "husband" always brings out in her.

"Exactly. Anybody can spend money. But the really smart women . . ."

"Say no more," she said, for she was already making a list and crossing things off and scribbling in improvements. Before she went to bed, she had drawn up an elaborate spending plan, and set up books to handle the checks coming and going each month. There was nothing simple about this; it was double-entry bookkeeping . . . triple-entry, in fact, for there was a column frankly marked "borrowed."

The first month's check sent her whole gang out shopping. I shuddered to think. She was quite capable of shooting the works on a new sweater for everybody . . . "just to get things started right."

But I completely misjudged her. She would have been capable of generosity on my money. But this was of a different breed. This was hers. This was money which screamed with pain if you touched it carelessly. This was money which bruised easily if you came too near it.

They all came home looking grim.

"Your child is a monster," Felicity said. "Presents for nobody. Not even light refreshments."

"Naturally not," Miss Boo said. "Refreshments are not wearing apparel."

Sally said sheepishly, "On me they are. A heavy layer between my bones and my underwear."

"What did you buy?" I asked, realizing that from now on things would be different in this house.

"One very sensible slip. Tailored. No silly lace to wear out and fall to pieces," Boo said defensively.

"The way it does on the slips I always buy you."

"Exactly," she said. "I don't think lace is appropriate for a schoolgirl. I

expect to have a few lace-trimmed slips in my trousseau, which naturally I assume you'll provide when the time comes. . . . Or do I have to start saving for that?"

The tailored slip covered the first month's buying. "I don't seem to need very much," she said innocently. "I seem pretty well outfitted at the moment."

The next month she looked at swimming suits, and they were a terrible temptation. But the old white one was still pretty good, and the best one could be passed down to every-day wear, and replaced when the markdowns came. The month passed without a purchase. Not without shopping. But without buying.

I took the matter in hand now. I went with her on the next shopping trip. She tried on lovely things as always, and made the most of her brief reflection in the mirror. But nothing was completely irresistible. The sales person, I thought, looked a bit fed up. I stole out of the dressing room where this intoxicating nonsense was going on, and apologized to her.

"Think nothing of it. They all try on *everything*!" she said over an armful of new candidates. "But at least you're in there pitching for a sale. When they come alone, they usually haven't the slightest intention."

Pitching or no pitching, we left without a purchase.

"I'm frightfully sorry," Boo said pleasantly to the limp saleswoman, "they're all charming. But nothing seems to look just right on *me*."

When we were outside, before I had a chance to scold her, she said meekly, "But you wouldn't want me to buy something that wasn't completely perfect, would you?"

"The red one was."

"Not quite," she said, trying to keep the honest regret out of her voice. "Besides it makes such a difference when what you're spending is *money*."

"I can't seem to remember what it was we *used* to spend," I said mildly.

"That was just that green stuff grownups sling around for people they love," she said with a twinkle. "But kids' money is practically sacred."

The next month I mentioned pj's. "Who'd waste money on clothes nobody sees?" she said with finality. "Anyway, I've matched up the green tops with the yellow-striped bottoms. They're not legally married, but they're very happy together."

Ignoring this, I said, "And of course you'll need something rather special

for the Faculty Tea. You know last year I got you the taffeta skirt with the gold nylon blouse."

"Ideal for this year," she said. "No *people* would see it. Only teachers. Besides, teachers think it's refined to look shabby."

"You mean you're not buying anything this month?" I thought we might as well get the cards on the table.

"My husband wouldn't approve," she said. "Not while I have all that silly stuff you bought me."

Her money began piling up. "I get dizzy when I think of it," she said. "I expect I'll be able to help start my husband in business, or something."

Each month she enters the sum in her book, and there it stays intact. "My frozen assets," she calls them. "And *do* they keep me *warm*?"

Every Saturday she goes shopping, and when she comes home, she has a list of things she could have bought.

After five or six months I began getting positively ashamed of her.

"What do people think? Probably that we're just too mean to dress you decently."

"Oh no. I tell 'em. The ones that matter," she said. "Anybody can *spend* money. It takes strong character to resist it. That's what you always told me."

Things didn't get better. Saving can become as pernicious a habit as spending.

"I belong to Spendthrifts Anonymous," she said. "The way to stay sober is not to spend the first dollar."

"You'll have to spend some next month," I said sternly. "You need a new raincoat, a dress for Sunday School, new shoes, and a skirt."

"Who looks at anybody in the rain?" she asked feebly, skipping the rest.

"Never mind that. I'm warning you."

"Okay," she said agreeably. "I'll shop next Saturday."

"I'll come with you."

Her face congealed in horror. "You wouldn't like the places I patronize," she said. "Very low altitude. Basement, in fact."

She came home from the trip, beaming. As she burst through the door, she cried, "I bought something."

“I should hope so. Raincoat? Shoes and skirt?”

“Well, not exactly,” she hedged. “I got something for you. A lovely scarf. Marked down.”

“And for you?”

“Well, I’ll tell you.” She always begins this way when she wishes to evade the issue. “I looked and looked. But to tell you the truth, nothing looks so good on me as . . . *money*.”

I could see by the convulsed merriment in her face that she was thinking about her “husband” and hoping that when he arrives, he will know how to read between the lines of her hard-earned shabbiness.

The Best Intentions

Sometimes when I find myself trying too hard, I remember the Perry family and Martha Brown, who had been the maid, comforter, friend, and unacknowledged mainstay of that house for nearly thirty years. Martha asked and expected nothing but her small weekly wage, and the right to go on serving as long as she had breath in her body. (You can see this is a story that didn't happen very recently.)

The Perry family, however, had shrunk in size and finances until all that was left was one daughter, Miss Charlotte Perry, and a big gloomy mansion on a street from which fashionableness had long ago packed up and moved away.

A large mortgage had been put on the old house, and meeting the monthly payments was a major crisis. Miss Charlotte knew the sensible adjustment was to dismiss Martha, sell the house for whatever it would bring, and settle herself in some modest apartment. But this Miss Charlotte could not bear to do because she knew Martha was too old to find a new job, and the family had considered it a moral responsibility to see that she always had a home in the big old house, and a place in the bosom of the Perry family.

Naturally Miss Charlotte, who was far from young herself, told the loyal old servant nothing of this daily financial struggle. Night after sleepless night she was haunted by the forlorn vision of poor Martha without home or job, too old and friendless to find another life. She worried along month after month, always for Martha's sake, and always with the bleak hope that something would pop up to solve things.

What did pop up, finally, was severe illness for herself. She had no choice then, for the matter was out of her hands. The bank sent Miss Charlotte to a resthome in the country, then put the house and the furniture up for sale. Martha effaced herself as quietly as possible from the scene.

In a couple of months Miss Charlotte was well enough to resume worrying, beginning just where she had left off. She telephoned the bank to see if they could get in touch with old Martha Brown, who she knew must be desperate.

Within a few hours Martha herself arrived at the resthome. The same old Martha, soft-spoken and drab and cheerful.

"Oh, Martha, how did you get here so quickly?" Miss Charlotte asked, her eyes filling with weak tears at the sight of her old friend.

“Well . . . my husband took the day off from his work and drove me down,” Martha said with an economical blush.

“Your husband! What on earth do you mean?”

“Well, you see, Miss Charlotte . . . I just thought I’d take a little rest before I looked for another job. So I got myself a light-housekeeping flat in a roominghouse. I thought it would be nice to sit and listen to the radio, and cook myself whatever food I liked.” Her eyes pecked timidly at her late employer’s face, to make sure she was giving no offense.

“After about a week, I noticed a nice-looking, white-haired man living in the front room of the second floor . . . we got to saying good morning when we met on the stairs . . . and one day he asked me was I cooking lamb stew up in my little flat . . . so I invited him to come up and have dinner with me . . . and well, he came, and we got acquainted.” She was galloping shyly now through her story to the end, and Miss Charlotte was sitting there with her ears unbelieving.

“He said he just loves hearing a woman running about her housework humming, and I guess I do hum when I cook . . . and anyway. . . .”

“You married him!” Miss Charlotte concluded in amazement.

“Yes. But what I wanted to tell you, dear . . . we’ve got a lovely big room waiting for you in our house. We’ve just bought a real nice house.” She gulped a minute. “Henry’s never had a real home before.” Then she brought out the truth. “You see . . . it’s our *old* house, where we all lived for such a long time.”

Miss Charlotte could say nothing, for the miraculous, droll wonder spreading through her mind.

Martha was saying gently, “So now we have our own home again, you and I.”

“And we wouldn’t have had it, if we hadn’t lost it,” Miss Charlotte said.

They sat there quietly, not knowing how to explain what had happened. A miracle had been forced upon them by what they thought was disaster.

When Miss Charlotte told me about this she said timidly, “People like me can only go so far with our good intentions. When things become unmanageable, Something else has to take over. Good as human intentions are, they sometimes stand in the way of a better working out. Maybe we have to learn we can trust life even more than we trust ourselves.

“After all, we inherit our own good intentions from Something which has

even better intentions than our own.”

The Public Spirit

The best thing about the Good Citizenship Club was that you mingled. You mingled with some very odd subjects, but you also mingled with all sorts of people. Even with seniors, who normally wouldn't have been caught dead looking at you.

"It gives you experience," Boo said. "Makes you feel terrible. But Felicity says that's fine experience."

Besides the personal element, it also exposed you to aspirations and desires bigger than you could handle. It stretched you till you ached. Boo came home from the meetings starry-eyed and moody, sometimes expecting us to drop everything and enlist in some world-wide humanitarian work they had discussed, sometimes finding us loathsomely complacent and selfish because we were just idly sitting on Uncle Sam's lap, like over-fed, spoiled babies.

"This house simply disgusts me," she said. "Everything in it is smug. Don't you realize that three out of every five people in the world are barefooted? And you've got a whole closet full of shoes! Why don't you *do* something?"

I tried to defend myself. "I'd give 'em away, darling, if that would help. But it's not as simple as all that. It's a very complex problem."

"Oh certainly. The well-fed man can always think of good reasons for going on being well fed. Why, Dr. Hunt says. . . ." Sociology strained through Dr. Hunt was quite a thing; but when you got *that* further strained through Boo, it became sheer fantasy. But I always listened respectfully, remembering how repulsive my own safe family had seemed to me when *I* was sixteen and had discovered there are baffling inequalities on this planet.

Usually after a meeting of the G.C.C. she was in despair because no big heroic act could be attempted that very day.

"Education! That's much too slow," she said. "We ought to *do* something. And all anybody offers us is words. . . . 'Let's have a debate' . . . 'Let's get up a round table discussion.' . . . I'm sick of talk."

"What would you like to do?"

"Something drastic. Maybe send my allowance to some little village in Africa every month. Maybe stop wearing silly clothes and just go into Levis and saddle shoes. Maybe if people saw us all wearing some kind of uniform, they'd get to *thinking*!"

I knew exactly how she felt. I knew well the humiliating absurdity of the deed compared to the need. For a few weeks it looked as if we were going to have a permanently disgruntled, out-of-joint humanitarian on our hands.

Then good old Dr. Hunt came to our rescue. He gave the club something to do. He got everybody working on a committee, and the next thing we knew there was going to be an Event. Committees met after school every day, and the atmosphere seethed with civic industry.

"We're inviting the public," Boo said. "We're arousing."

There would be a giant mass meeting on a Friday night when normally people just waste their time having fun. . . .

She got home late for dinner, and her eyes were glowing with public-spirited zeal.

"Guess what? Dr. Hunt picked me and the President of the club—he's a senior!—to go around town today putting up posters. Everywhere they'd let us—beauty shops, delicatessens . . . specialty shops, bus stops . . . anywhere the public will notice them. We want everybody to know about the wonderful speaker we're going to have."

"That's fine," I said. "Who *is* the speaker?"

She looked completely deflated for a long moment. Then she had the grace to blush. "Well, I haven't the faintest idea," she admitted, "but Joe, the President of the club—he's certainly a doll!"

The Having and the Doing

Wisdom comes in through small doors sometimes. . . .

Two of our favorite friends are the small sons of one of *your* favorite motion picture actors. The other day these youngsters went to visit a couple of contemporaries who live like little princes, in the midst of every conceivable weary luxury that wealth and lack of imagination can provide.

The governess, who had taken Bill and Mike from their own ranch to visit, brought back amazed accounts of the wonderful mechanical toys, the swimming pool, the gymnasium and the riding horses with which the hosts were encumbered. But what Bill and Mike brought home was the wanting of a two-wheeled cart.

"If we had one, I could pull Mike around in it," Bill told his father excitedly. "And maybe we could haul wood up to the house for the fireplaces."

"Sure you could," their father said. "How did you think you could get one?"

"Well, we could call up and ask 'em where they bought theirs," Mike said casually, measuring his father out of the corner of his eye.

"You fellows happen to have any money?" the father asked.

They admitted they had a little. . . . But it was pledged to pay Cub Scout dues, and their mother's birthday was coming. . . .

"Tell you what we *could* do," their father said thoughtfully. But before he had finished the sentence, both boys were ahead of him.

"Sure we could, Pop," they said. "We could make it easy as anything." When you are nine and seven, and used to hammer and nails, there's nothing you couldn't make!

"That's right," Pop said. "I know where there are a couple of wheels down in the barn."

Plans for the Saturday carpentry filled the whole week. Never was a cart so dreamed about and planned for. They drew the pattern on smoothed-out wrapping paper; they measured, and sawed and perspired. Pop helped with suggestions, but they did the work.

They built it all themselves. And they built much more than a slightly

wobbly cart out there on the sunny barn floor with the doors flung open and the sky smiling down on the hotly clutched nails and the sandpapered boards.

You'd hardly expect that two small boys would understand that they were building more than just a toy cart. But they did. For at the end of the afternoon, when the cart was almost ready for a triumphant trip around to the front of the house to be shown to the rest of the family, Mike said, "Which do you think will be more fun? Makin' or havin'?"

Bill sat back among the sawdust, and thought about it. Then he grinned through his big new far-apart teeth.

"Makin'," he said.

People go to lectures and read books heavy in the hand and heavier in the mind. They discuss and argue, and move big cumbersome pieces of mental furniture about from side to side. And then, unannounced and unheralded, wisdom blows in through some small opened window in the mind, casual as a petal from the tree.

We live whole lifetimes groping among wise syllables. Then one day a child says the sum quite simply.

"Which will be better? Havin' or makin'?"

"Why, makin'."

They don't need to explain it. They've found it out by doing. The thing proves itself.

Making must come from within, while having is an external circumstance which may or may not be worth its weight in satisfaction. The happiest people of the earth are those who learn that difference early. There's nobody so right, so safe from the whims of discontent as a man mated to his work. A man and his work are like a lock and a key. Useless without each other.

The "born" mechanic, the natural housewife, the "green-thumbed" gardener . . . these are the real kings of the earth, the people who love what they are doing. So are doing it well.

If work is not its own reward, there comes no other pay worth having. Thousands of years ago the Preacher said it like this:

> *There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 2:24

The Gift

Tumpti had been with us about a year, when we found that up to now we had been on probation, and hadn't realized it.

"I tly you out. Now I stay," he announced one morning at breakfast.

We responded to that surprising news according to our varying natures. Most of us said, "Well!" and let it go at that. Boo said, "So we didn't flunk out!"

Tumpti, all his features coagulating in merriment, said, "Now I send for my tlunk. Fit very nice in loom."

That very afternoon the trunk arrived from a storage warehouse. It was so heavy two burly giants could barely wrestle it into the room, much to Tumpti's disgust; he plainly felt that if they'd just step aside he could heave it to his shoulder and run in with it.

Now that we had him anchored in our life by a trunk, we felt he really belonged to us.

"It's something like when you get the last installment paid, and the mink's all yours," we said, honoring one of our family jokes.

Whatever else was in the trunk, there was one article which he brought out at dinner and showed with pride. At first glance it appeared to be a large gilt-framed picture; but when you looked more carefully, you saw it was like no picture you'd ever seen before. It was made up entirely of semiprecious stones, some cut and polished, others in their primitive state. The stones had been carefully mounted, and the whole effect was like an exquisite sampler made in a language you couldn't quite read.

"Why, Tumpti, that's a beautiful thing! Where on earth . . . ?"

"I make," he said humbly.

"But where did you get such wonderful stones?" We could identify amethysts, carnelians, different kinds of quartz, and a few choice pieces of turquoise.

"I find," he said. "U.S.A. Government send all Japanese people to Arkansas while war bangs." He clutched the big sampler to him to free his hands in order to act out the last verb, "Bang bang." Obviously there was no malice in the memory.

We tried to make sympathetic sounds, not taking our eyes off the collection of stones.

“I have fine time at U.S.A. Government vacation. Nothing to do.”

“So you collected these beautiful stones. Did everybody make a collection?”

He looked haughty. “Ten sousand people in camp. I only one corrects locks. People too razy!”

The conversation came to a stop now, but he still stood there looking down at his treasures.

“So now I give you pleasant,” he said gruffly. “You take locks. I find prenty, some other day maybe.” He thrust the frame at me, and with it came a stream of his muttering, half Japanese, half English, for his own generosity was embarrassing to him.

“Why, we can’t accept such a beautiful thing, Tumpti. It must have taken you a long long time to find such extraordinary stones.”

“You take,” he said belligerently. “Stone no good. Maybe you punch holes and make string of beads.”

“I wouldn’t let anyone *touch* it,” I cried. “It’s a work of art exactly as it is.”

I added lamely, “But of course we can’t accept it.”

“Then I dlop on froor,” he threatened, looking as if he intended to do exactly that. I seized the frame just in time, and he beamed with joy. Then his little face flushed pink.

“I got nobody else I rike to give pleasant to,” he said. “I got nobody else anyplace.”

“We’ll put it on the mantel in the living room,” said Boo, who also cannot bear emotion. “And when people admire it, we’ll tell them it was given to us by one of our best friends.”

He bowed then, all dignity. “Sank you ve’y much,” he said, as if it was *we* who had given *him* the gift.

Love

Love came at us without warning. At any age, love is a shock when it attacks you. But when you're just past sixteen, it almost unhinges the universe.

To begin with, anyone on the outside is entitled to stare at it . . . and not see it as it is. In the prose of ordinary living, it is a typographical error, yet it makes so much sense that for the first time one understands why the world was created. The most profound of all events, from the outside it appears to be just nonsense.

In amazement you perceive that you are suddenly wearing the classical robes of poetry and drama and music; but if you are a sixteen-year-old, on you love is a most comical costume. It hasn't even the wistful pathos of a Pagliacci's domino; it is grotesquely too big, laughably too beautiful. You know you look absurd in it. You know that every gesture you make is full-fledgedly ridiculous. But you cannot help it. If you could help it, it would not be love. You just have to be recklessly ridiculous, moaning helplessly inside where no one can hear.

When love strikes a sixteen-year-old, it hits the whole family. Nothing is the same for a few days. And what can the others in the family do about it? Nothing. If you are blind to what damage you do to everything precious you and your child have felt about each other, you can resort to the vandalism of humor. You can try to laugh it off. But love doesn't laugh off. All that happens is that you become forevermore someone in your child's eyes who must not be allowed to come close to what is important.

Actually, there is no right way for a family to behave when love knocks at the front door, and bursts in without waiting to be invited. You may try your best to strike a balance between your child's illumined viewpoint and ordinary common sense . . . but you'll say the inspiredly wrong thing every time you open your mouth. I can't even picture what right conduct *could* be. Perhaps the ideal behavior would be to put yourself in the deep freeze and just wait until a day when she is hungry again for the plain bread of normal living and loving and being.

There is no right behavior. So if you're sensible, you just try to be as inconspicuous as possible. She'll not be noticing you much anyway. She'll not be noticing anything, for suddenly she has stepped across an imaginary line into a world that has never before existed. A world beyond dimension, beyond geography . . . long dreamed toward but never before touched.

The funny-paper symptoms of love are all present, the not-eating, the not-hearing, the bemused enchantment. But it would be crass and gauche and fatal for them to be diagnosed as if they ever before had been experienced. They are new; no one since the world began has felt *this* way. If you catalogue them blithely and say, "Oh . . . so you're in love! Now don't be silly, darling," you only show how insensitive and ignorant you are. So you try to say nothing at all. The hardest job an adult is ever asked to do about a child. An almost impossible assignment at any time, and *now*. . . .

But if you are wise you'll try. You'll listen mutely if you're offered any confidence. You'll wear dark glasses, but you mustn't look like a panhandler standing with a beggar's cup. You'll take what you're offered, and make no comment, either in word or look.

It happened in our house with practically no warning. One day she was our irrepressible roller skater, with a flying pony tail and a farmhand's unfillable appetite. The next day she was a sleepwalker, listening to music that nobody else could hear. One day she was full of jokes and pranks and happy earthiness; the next she was a poet whose stanzas were silence. And we, sad battered humans that we were, could only stand aside and wait, remembering how we had felt once . . . or even twice.

There comes a time, of course, when love *has* to be talked about. When nothing else is worth doing. That's when the door of danger swings wide open and you're liable to throw yourself into the pit of destruction. For then it's almost impossible not to say the wrong thing.

I had been waiting for that moment; I had been practicing my reticence so I'd have it perfect when the moment came. Because I knew that sooner or later, it would come, and I'd be offered a view of this wonderful thing. I could look —but I mustn't touch. I would be offered it, and then be denied it because I would not understand. No matter how I behaved, it would be evident that I didn't understand. Or else that I understood intrusively well.

The moment came just after dinnertime on a long twilight.

"I wish we could go out walking someplace," she said. "Just the two of us. You and me, I mean." I knew what "just the two of us" really meant, but I didn't let that show in my face.

"We could," I said.

"I wish we could walk someplace in the country. I hate all these nice proper houses. They disgust me."

"I know, dear."

“They don’t disgust you,” she said almost angrily, to warn herself she was going to walk with an alien spirit. “You like ’em!”

“I like woods better,” I said contritely.

We walked, and neither of us talked, and I could see tall woods growing up invisibly on either side of us in the places where houses were imagining *they* were.

At last she said, “Do you think a person who is a senior could really notice a junior? I mean *really*?”

“He might.”

“I mean not just to think she was a doll, or something silly like that? I mean really *recognize*.”

“He might,” I ventured again. “After all, *you* recognize.”

She thought that over for a block, her face pink with feeling.

“Yes, perhaps,” she said at last, like someone in a very slow-paced play, where the audience has all evening to spend and there isn’t much plot to get in the way of the lines.

I was cold, because in my eagerness to get out into that imaginary forest for our walk, I had shrugged into my too thin jacket. But when I shivered, I saw that she read it as my unexpected awareness of Life all around us. So I shivered again.

“He spoke to me this morning,” she said.

“What about?” I asked, by mistake.

“What about? Why, nothing, of course. He just spoke to me. He said ‘Hi.’ That’s exactly what he said. He came up behind me. I could feel him from the minute he sort of zoomed into the corridor from the Chem Lab. He kind of slowed up and walked along behind me, and then he sort of leaned down . . . he’s awfully tall . . . even for a senior . . . and he said ‘Hi.’ ” She was quiet, then she asked ardently, “Do you suppose he . . . meant anything?”

“Of course he did,” I said, hoping I’d not be asked to translate.

“Oh gosh,” she breathed. “I hope so. He said ‘Hi’ . . . Just like that.”

I shivered again. Life was pretty wonderful.

The Diploma

When you're praying to be wise yourself, it sometimes helps to think of the wise people you've known. So I remembered an old-fashioned woman I know. Nothing about her is modern; even her virtues are rather out of style. But her children think the world of her, for she has always been the kind of mother they could depend on. No matter how boyish and complicated were her son's emotions, somehow Toots could always be relied upon to understand.

But one day there came to her the greatest test she had ever faced in all her years of being a mother.

Steve's letter, pages and pages scrawled over with feverish handwriting, arrived special delivery. Trustingly he poured out all his innermost reasons for a dramatic action he wanted to take. He was certain what her answer would be.

But she was not so certain.

He began by telling her about a girl. Joan's name had popped up frequently in Steve's letters all through the winter. But not until now did Toots have the secret of the mysterious sudden failure of Steve in this, his last year at the university. Now it all came out; he was enthusiastically in love, and he wanted to be married next week.

It could have gone along in the ordinary way, he said, except that Joan's family was moving to another city. Too, her father had offered him the big chance of going into the new business. He knew his mother would agree that the last five months of college were utterly unimportant compared to this wonderful opportunity.

Besides, Joan's father said a college education was all bunk. He had made his pile, and he hadn't got past the first few months of high school. So that showed you. What Steve wanted was to stop being a student, and be a man with a fine new job and a wonderful family of in-laws. He knew his mother would see it as he did. The letter went on, page after rhapsodic page.

More than anything else Toots wanted her son to continue thinking of her as he always had, somebody to be depended upon to see his point of view, and to support it against the world if need be. She walked the floor, trying to look into the future and realize what might grow out of this moment which lay in her hand like an unplanted seed.

Then she sat down and wrote what she probably would not have had the

strength of character to say if Steve had been standing there before her, his eyes ardent and reproachful. She wrote it like a business letter.

Dear Steve:

You and I entered into a gentlemen's agreement when you started your college education. We did not draw up any contract, but we both understood that I was investing the money which I had saved all my life to put into something in which I had faith. You, for your part, were guaranteeing that you would invest four years of your time. I have spent all my money, and you have spent part of your time.

What you have got out of your share of this investment has been as large or as small as your own effort. I am unable to alter or change your dividend. Nobody but you can say whether or not it has been worthwhile. But I am entitled to my return from our business partnership.

If these new friends of yours are worth going into business with, they will recognize that you have a prior commitment, which will not be terminated until the day after your commencement. If this is an honest opportunity, it will wait for its proper time.

But whether it waits or not, I insist upon my legitimate dividend from my investment. All I can get for my money is your diploma. I want that.

Very truly yours,
MARCELLA BOWMAN

She sent the letter and spent a sleepless night, remembering all the little-boy Steves who were gone now . . . the lad with the run-over puppy, the nine-year-old who had made her a rickety footstool for Christmas. . . . She nearly sent a wire telling him not to read the letter. But she didn't send the wire, and a week went by somehow, uncomforted by the conviction that she had done the right thing. Two weeks passed without any word from Steve.

When his letter came, it was scrupulously courteous; it said he would live up to his side of the "business bargain." It made no mention of Joan, or the renounced opportunity.

It was a miserable four months for both of them. When June came and Toots went down for commencement, Steve was formal and tragic as only a very young person can be. When she asked about Joan he evaded the question

elaborately to show her how much he had been hurt.

Never once did he call her by her old pet name; she was Mother, and the word held her at arms' length.

Commencement Day was probably the most forlorn day of her life. At the end of it, she had the diploma, which she had said was all she would get from their partnership. It was indeed all she had.

They drove five hundred miles home together. Steve was faultless in his courtesy toward her, but all the old camaraderie and confidence had gone. All the fun and quickness had gone.

She told herself: "when we're home . . . when he finds his work . . . we'll slip back into our old life, and all this will be forgotten."

All summer the dead body of the diploma lay between them.

No really good job seemed available in their town. So he finally went to work in a gas station. He came home at night, dirty-faced and tired. He would look in the mirror and say, "Well, college man, you're a distinguished-looking individual."

That job blew up and there were others, equally routine. The winter dragged along and Steve was getting nowhere. Listlessly he tried this and that, and finally became an insurance salesman. But his heart wasn't in it.

The breach between them had started by being only as wide as a sheepskin; now they were separated by unplowable acres of despair.

Then a new girl came to town. This romance didn't happen quickly. This friendship was a slow-growing, patient plant, not an exotic cut flower. Toots and Elizabeth understood each other long before Steve saw what was happening to him.

In his happiness he went out and sold insurance harder than ever. For now he had stopped trying to prove how wrong his mother had been.

He got an appointment to tell the principal of a school about insurance.

The principal said, "Say, boy, you explain this stuff like a teacher. I happen to be an authority on recognizing good teacher material when I see it."

Steve said earnestly, "I'd like to be a teacher, matter of fact."

"Fine. Have you a college diploma?"

"Well, no," Steve said slowly. "But my mother has one. With my name on it."

The Big Walk

People are always reminding me that I live a very sedentary life. It's an insulting phrase, especially when one's picture of oneself is an animated cartoon of frenzied activity.

"What you ought to do is take a nice long walk every day," various well-meaning advisers said. I ignored the good advice cheerfully for years, because walking seems a ludicrous waste of time to me, unless there is no other form of transportation available except dogsled. But came a day when I couldn't help admitting that my taking-a-long-walk apparatus needed using, or it might become obsolete.

"But I do walk," I said. "I walk all over the house."

"That doesn't count. The walking that's good for you has to be done out in the open, with chin up, stomach in, and legs swinging in long strides."

"You can't live in a house and dash back and forth between housekeeping and a desk without doing some walking," I said sulkily. Mentally I traced my steps through an ordinary average morning . . . shower, run downstairs, out to get newspaper usually tossed on the neighbor's lawn, back to breakfast room, rush to the front door to tell the little boy from next door that we can't buy any more Boy Scout peanuts, back to breakfast room, up to workroom in rear of house, perching on typewriter chair, running length of house to see if the noise at the patio gate is the postman, out on balcony to view mailbox, back to desk, up the hall to find the dictionary borrowed for a Scrabble game, back to desk, out on balcony to see if mail carrier has arrived, back to desk, across room to pencil sharpener, run through length of house to balcony to see, etc., back to desk, and on and on, through the whole day of chores and errands. Carried on at a dog-trot because there is too much of it to be accomplished at a mere walk. And yet they said that what I needed. . . .

"The way to do it," I was told, "is to make a lively game of it. Try to walk a little farther each day. Get a pedometer, and keep a chart. You can enjoy anything if you'll put some thought into it."

So I got the pedometer. That in itself took quite a lot of walking around the shopping district, because Beverly Hills is a place where walking has become practically an extinct folk custom. But at last in a golf equipment shop I found a pedometer, not to measure walking, the salesman said, but to check on the distances between tee and green.

He showed me how to adjust it, and how to measure my own step. My idea of the interesting way to measure was to step in a puddle of muddy water, then walk nonchalantly across a white rug. But he said there were easier ways, and laid down a yardstick on the floor, then crouched beside it while I strolled past. Turned out that 24 inches was about right for me, a sedate-walking woman past her first youth.

Then, diffidently, he suggested that the pedometer would work best if I could attach it to my leg. On my garter, say, with the little instrument slipped in the top of my hose, perhaps. I tried it, and I must say it gave off a most businesslike click. Anyone passing me would think I had a defectively jointed artificial limb which creaked with every bend of the knee.

I promised myself that I'd take a long walk the next afternoon. Maybe two miles, to start with. But in the morning, just for fun I would wear the pedometer around the house. Down to breakfast, up to my bedroom, back to my workroom, through the house to look out my balcony door for the mail carrier . . . just the customary routine hither-and-yoning.

At three I put on my jacket for the Big Walk. Before I started I had better check on the pedometer's reading.

And guess what? Just living my ordinary sedentary life, I had chalked up more than four miles!

So now I don't have to listen to anybody's good advice. So now I just sit and sit, enjoying my sedentary life and clicking off mileage on my pedometer.

Poor Winthrop

Love is not blind. Love is a super way of seeing. It makes everything dear and unique, which is hidden to other eyes, stand out in billboards visible only to the one who loves. Joe may have looked like a pretty average senior to anyone else, but to Boo he was a masterpiece up to which the race had been working for long centuries. He was smarter than anybody else, more relaxed, more witty, more everything. He was, to borrow a teen-ager's own cliché, The Most.

But that left everyone else suddenly deficient. Poor Winthrop especially.

"How could that silly *child* expect me to go to the movies with him?" Boo asked in honest astonishment. "Can't he *see*?"

"He probably thinks you're still going steady with him, dear."

"Eeek," she said. "How could I have given such an impression?"

I dared not mention the escalator which had seemed such a sound idea a few weeks ago.

"He's a child," she said again, obviously having found the perfect word to describe his total ineptitude.

I refrained from reminding her that he is eight months older than she. But she read my mind. "Even so," she said bitterly. "Some boys stay immature all their lives. Immaturer than girls anyway."

I tried to be practical. "Why couldn't you just go to the movies with him? After all, you're not dated up to go with anyone else, are you?"

"Suppose I went to the movies with this child . . . and I met someone? What would anybody think, seeing me? They'd think I was satisfied. They'd probably see me laughing at his corny jokes and stuff . . . the way you just naturally do to be polite . . . and they'd think I was just like him."

"Quite a predicament," I said, indulging in the relief of sarcasm since for one moment we were not standing on holy ground.

"He bores me," she said, becoming more irately specific. "He talks about stuff just the way a girl does. His voice has changed all right, but his mind hasn't. What he says is just like what a girl would say."

"Such as?"

“Oh, I don’t know. He talks about food. He loves macaroni and cheese, and some kind of eggplant his pore ole mother cooks. Imagine talking about *food*.”

“Felicity talks about food.”

“See! That’s just what I’m saying. He talks like a girl. He just loves green. ‘Whyn’t you get a nice green sweater, Boo. I bet you’d look like a doll.’ Eeek.”

“That’s his way of paying you a compliment about your hair.”

She held her nose expressively. “If I want to talk with a girl, I’d go to the movies with a girl. Girl-talk!”

“George Bernard Shaw once said that was a good test. If you want to know whether or not attraction will survive the years, just ask yourself, ‘Would I find this person uniquely interesting if we were of the same sex?’ ”

She looked utterly disgusted. “George Who-who What? I never heard of him,” she said conclusively. “He probably said it when he was good and old, too.”

“Maybe,” I conceded, remembering that practically everything GBS had to say he said when he was good and old. But I had done my best for Winthrop. I had even called in George Bernard Shaw to help his cause. But I could see it was lost beyond recall.

We Flunk Out

She gave us our chance, and we muffed it. I don't know by what stages the lovely affair became mundane enough for Joe to be invited to our house. But there came a day when Boo said, with giant economy-sized casualness, "Oh by the way, a boy's going to drop around tonight."

No need to ask *what* boy. From her face you could see there was only one.

"Happens he's a senior. He knows I'm having some trouble in Math, so he's going to help me."

"Naturally," I said with panting heart. "I suppose that's just part of being fellow members of the Good Citizenship Club."

"That's it," she cried, grateful for the device.

I said, going all out, "Why not ask him for dinner?"

She brooded cautiously. "What're we having? He doesn't just eat anything."

I wanted to say, "Neither do we," but I knew that could be an estranging remark, so instead I asked intelligently about his preferences.

We discussed that rich subject and then she said cannily, "I wouldn't want him to think we were *anxious* to have him."

"How could he ever get such an impression?" I inquired blandly.

"Well, you never can tell. Some boys think friendliness is pursuit. That's what Felicity says."

"I can hear her saying it."

"But Felicity doesn't know Joe," Boo said in experimental triumph. "None of 'em know him. Because he doesn't have any time for girls. That's what everybody says."

"Except maybe a member of the Good Citizenship Club who is weak in Math."

"Something like that," she said, and met my eye with bold innocence.

Everybody in the house was excited about his coming, and we all confessed it by not mentioning him, nor appearing to realize. We were in fact, just normally hysterical with tenseness.

Boo had a few last-minute instructions, and she gave them like a coach getting his team ready for an ordeal. “Most families keep out of sight when a boy’s in the house,” she said.

“That seems rude.”

“I don’t say you have to. I’m just telling you what’s customary.”

“We’d like to do the right thing,” we assured her. “But on the other hand, we’re naturally friendly people. We’d speak pleasantly to *anybody* in the house and pass the time of day a little.”

“Well . . . let him indicate,” she said. “If he acts like he’d like to talk to you, you can listen real politely.” I saw that her grammar had been murdered by anxiety. I recalled what had happened to mine in the few really pivotal moments in my life.

“You can count on us, darling,” I ventured reassuringly.

“Oh for heaven’s sakes . . . don’t act like it’s important!” she cried in dire distaste.

“Of course not,” I promised. “It is, but we won’t.”

She herself answered the doorbell when it rang, and for a long time they stood in the hall, with a tent of muttered undertones protecting them from the family climate. Then they came nonchalantly into the living room, and we felt ourselves being expertly inspected. Boo, gulping rather badly, introduced us, and Joe made good-citizenly acknowledgments. We mumbled shyly but robustly, trying to weigh out just the proper grams of unconcern and hospitality.

Apparently our blend was exactly the right mixture to intrigue him for, to everyone’s amazement, he motioned Boo to a chair and then sat down himself.

He tossed his glance around at the reading matter behind which we had all been cowering. He had a few intelligent remarks to make on each subject. You could sense he was doing everything possible to put us at our ease.

Though I was positively shy about looking at him, I could see he was a nice boy, not too sure of himself. Wordlessly I warned myself that his not-too-sureness would probably take the form of brash blustering.

He had blond hair, almost whitened by the sun, and his thin face was tanned to the color of cork. With this he wore honest blue eyes, and a smile that blew briefly across his mouth, like the wind where it listeth. With great relief, I liked him. But no doubt some of that liking was just the fall-out from

Boo, whose liking was sending out radar waves in every direction.

At precisely the right moment, he and his pupil adjourned to the library, after he had courteously corrected a few opinions we had been cherishing:

(a) that our farmers need government help;

(b) that, compared to the Old Masters' work, modern paintings are members of the Jukes family;

(c) that Airacobras will resist obsolescence longer than some other planes;

(d) that riboflavin builds mental health.

After they left, we sat stunned, trying to picture what would now happen to Math. If it was mentioned, of course.

At nine o'clock I thought of taking in the usual midnight snack served to a homework-doer at this hour. Then I rejected the notion in horror. Joe probably wouldn't approve of cookies and milk. And if he didn't, I certainly should be perpetrating a political or a cultural boner.

They thought of food themselves, however, and on Joe's way out of the house at nine-thirty, they passed the refrigerator and in passing ate practically all the remains of the roast chicken Tumpti was planning to serve the next day. So . . . we would have a tantrum from him in the morning. . . . Well, better to suffer that than to mar our child's entire life.

We thought resignedly, "This is the beginning of the new order. We'll have Joe on our hands . . . or somebody like him . . . every night from now on."

But we were wrong.

We didn't even find out the facts for nearly a week. During that week homework was done in the afternoon. The two of them sat in Joe's mongrel car, parked at our curb or on some street nearby, Boo on the back seat, Joe on the front, studying earnestly.

"But why?" I asked helplessly. "It doesn't sound comfortable."

"It's very comfortable," Boo said. "And besides our minds are at rest."

"Your minds?" I cried incredulously. "What on earth have your minds got to do with it?"

"Why, we both know where each other *is*," she said. "This way we don't have to wonder. It puts your mind to rest."

I tried to accept that without writhing. "But . . . but wouldn't your minds be just as much at rest if you studied on each side of our library table?"

She shook her head earnestly.

"The space in the car belongs to us," she said. "At least it belongs to Joe. It's the only place that is really ours. It's kind of our own home . . . temporarily."

"I see," I said dismally.

"And besides . . . Joe knows perfectly well that you people don't like him. Don't even understand him."

"Why . . . wherever did he get such an idea? We're . . . we're just crazy about him."

"Don't be insincere, please," she said patiently. "He knows all right."

"But we do like him. We think he's simply wonderful. We never saw anybody like him."

"I know all that," she said confidently. "That's hardly what we're discussing. I just happened to remark that he knows you don't like him."

"What gave him such an idea?"

"You'll find as you know him better that Joe's hardly ever wrong about things."

"This may be the only thing he's wrong about . . . us not liking him," I protested.

"He can tell. Joe says there's a kind of atmosphere when people don't like you. For one thing, the night he was here, you never offered us a midnight snack. Joe says that was your subconscious mind wanting not to feed our friendship."

"My subconscious mind wasn't in it at all," I said helplessly. Then I admitted the truth, almost in tears. "You see, darling, I had forgotten to ask you and I couldn't bear to do the wrong thing."

As I heard myself making this shameful confession I saw in a blaze of clarity what is basically wrong with most of us parents these days. *We're scared to death of displeasing our children.*

She saw nothing demoralized or abnormal in my attitude. She was used to seeing all kinds of adults backed into a corner by the young. No wonder they feel insecure, these addle essence. The very persons who should be towers of certainty for them are crumbling down before them. Adults are bowing down to consult the vacillating judgment of the very young. And the youngsters, knowing what shifting quicksand their own judgment is, naturally feel unsure

and alarmed within themselves.

Corroborating my own quick analysis, she tried to reassure me. “Well, don’t worry about it,” she said. “If Joe ever changes his mind, he’ll come into the house.”

“Try to persuade him, dear,” I said. I couldn’t bear to think of them living their whole lives through in a beat-up tin carcass born a Chevvy and now a confused monstrosity of Ford-Oldsmobile-Chrysler. It seemed like a drafty, claustrophobic life. And sedentary as the mischief.

Long Live Joe

I don't know when love came down from Olympus and began walking with the mere mortals in our house. But at any rate, it made the descent safely. For suddenly Joe was reconciled to us. Now the whole house was filled with his tall rangy presence, his winsome grin askew on his lovable face. And also the house was filled with his absence when he just couldn't avoid being somewhere else. Occasionally he simply had to run home . . . to change his clothes, for instance. When he wasn't with us, the air was as filled with talk about him as a blizzard is filled with snowflakes.

Joe knew everything; final authority on all subjects.

"Joe says. . . ."

"Joe doesn't believe. . . ."

"Joe foresees a time. . . ."

This stage was our crucial test. One utterance of doubt or disagreement and we would have banished ourselves as hopeless half-wits. Our eyebrows got weary with the acrobatics of credulity; our smiles ached with admiring astonishment; our voices constantly climbed ladders of "Is that so?" and "Well, well!"

"What difference does it make?" we reminded each other indulgently. "All knowledge is relative."

"*And* they laughed at Fulton when he sat down to play."

"So we won't laugh," we agreed. "We may burst, but we won't laugh."

I think Joe was a little in love with all of us. For after all, such total approval is heady intoxication, and pathetically rare in the experience of most of us. Anyway he obviously enjoyed sitting in our living room or our kitchen and holding forth on any and all subjects. He probably felt he had never before been in the presence of such delightfully uninformed yet receptive people. In knowledge we were all virgin forests.

Everybody but Tumpti, of course. When Joe expounded in the kitchen he had to make sure what day it was. Only on Thursday could he speak freely there. Otherwise, Tumpti would flip his all-encompassing white apron as if shooing off a flock of jabbering hens.

"Sklam," Tumpti would say. "Young boy know nothing. Better keep hole

in head shut. Few blains reak out."

Joe magnanimously forgave him (forgiving as he ate, naturally). "Quite a character," Joe said. "I might write a play about him sometime."

Boo cried, "*Oh Joe* . . . are you going to write a play?"

"Sometime," he said. "When I get around to it."

"You didn't tell me!" she cried with accusing rapture.

"Lots of things I haven't told you, Woman," Joe said. That didn't seem possible to us.

"I knew he was going to write music," Boo confided happily. "But he hadn't mentioned any plays. Gosh."

"It's nothing," Joe said modestly. "Besides, let's wait until I've done 'em."

"But if you say you will, why you will!" Boo breathed. "Remember how you told me yesterday you were going to eat six ham sandwiches for lunch—and you did!"

"That's right," he conceded. "Well, we'll see."

Whenever we opened the front door, or answered the telephone, or went into the garage, there was Joe, arriving or leaving.

Felicity, slightly bitter on the subject, expressed it in her own way. "It's like a whodunnit. Every time you people open a closet, Joe falls out."

Even so, the day . . . and the night . . . just wasn't long enough to see all we wanted of Joe.

One of us recklessly asked, "When does Joe study, Boo?"

And was answered by the others, "Is there a comma in that sentence?"

Boo, naturally, ignored that heavy-footed adult wit. Boo said, raising her golden eyebrow, "Study? Why should Joe study? He gets A. In the subject he likes, anyway."

Undaunted, adult humor persisted. "What subject is that? Boology?"

Even more undaunted teen-age tolerance persisted. She tried courteously to smile, but the smile was slightly rancid.

I thought to myself, Oh, the poor gallant young. What they endure from us. We're two races utterly alien. No wonder there's the taint of race prejudice between us.

Writers

One thing about writers: they like to be invited to meals with other writers. (Or probably with anybody!)

Anyway, I was invited to lunch to meet an eight-year-old prodigy, equipped with a lot of natural talent and a somewhat breathless mother. I anticipated a rather confounding time, although my hostess assured me we'd have fun. So much in common, she said, not specifying just *what*.

The guest of honor wore a ruffled pinafore, and she had yellow curls and eyes the color a paper doll would have if you drew them in with a nice blue pencil.

"I've decided to be a writer," she said confidently.

"Have you begun working at it?" I asked, trying not to sound patronizing.

"Of course. I've written about two hundred poems."

"Good ones?"

"Well, they're not spelled right, and the punctuation is terrible. But some of them are quite good. Not all of them, of course."

Whenever writers have a chance at would-be writers, they break out a certain monologue; all about how important it is to have discipline, to write something every day whether you feel like doing it or not . . . the business about keeping the pen limber and obedient . . . the paragraph comparing writing to other work in which one wouldn't expect to succeed by only working when you feel like working.

Paula listened to this with great courtesy. But with equal courtesy, she disagreed.

"Yes, but I'm not going to be that kind of writer," she said.

"You're not? What kind are you going to be?"

"I'm going to be a good writer," she said simply.

We were all staggered by that. It whirled us back to the wistful beginning when we were all going to be good writers.

"You see," she said earnestly, "you can't write well unless you wait for inspiration."

Her blue eyes are honest and unafraid; she doesn't suspect she has said something profound. But a montage thunders across my vision . . . huge oppressive volumes and masses of writing cascading across the weary world day after day . . . then like a blessed lilt of calmness and joy, the few winged words of grace written in a lifetime. Never any words written but those few. . . .

What a wealth of silence . . . what a waiting and a treasuring there would have been if only all of us had kept that standard we started with. Never a word written except the inspired words!

Someone dared ask, "But what is inspiration, Paula?"

She thinks awhile. "Well . . . inspiration is where . . ." she speaks slowly because she is thinking deeply. I like the beginning of the definition. "Inspiration is where . . ." a locality in the geography of the mind. . . .

"I guess . . ." she has it now; it goes more quickly. "Inspiration is where you look at something, and you see it more beautiful than it usually is."

Her eyes consult my face to see if I agree. I doubt if she would amend her definition if I didn't. But she is glad that I do.

"And why do you suppose it's more beautiful than it usually is?" I'm half afraid of asking.

But I need have no fear, for she says, "Because . . . well, because you're there to see it. Wanting to tell about it makes you see it better."

It was a good definition before, but now it has wings of wisdom. Now it has in it the very essence of beauty, which has trinity of being . . . the object, the eye, and finally the word brought back from that journey into a mental place so that others may see it . . . more beautiful than it usually is.

I say to her, "Paula, you *be* that kind of writer."

Then Boo brings us back, "Let's us all eat our ice cream shall we?" she says. "I have to meet Joe in twenty minutes."

So we eat.

Crisis

Love went on, gathering momentum every day. There was time now for nothing but Joe. Math may have brought them together, but *they* kept everything else apart. Boo's grades went into a nosedive. She couldn't even seem to concentrate on that fact.

"So I'm not a brain," she said contentedly.

"But at least you don't have to be a moron."

"Maybe morons are happier. Joe says . . ."

"Don't tell me what Joe says, please. Your *report card* says!"

But she told me anyway. "Joe says the happiest race on earth are the Polynesians. And he doubts if any of them could pass an aptitude test. And as for IQ's . . . they never heard of them."

"So you want to be a Polynesian? You're starting about sixteen years . . . and nine months . . . too late."

"Don't be anatomical, please," she said wearily. "Joe says the scourge of present-day humor is that it's anatomical."

"We're not discussing humor," I reminded her grumpily. "We're discussing your slump in intelligence."

We knew something had to be done. But what, was the question. We wished frantically for an expert to help us. But we knew only one expert, and he was already on the case. We alternated between thinking that this very day we must act decisively, then weakly deciding that we'd just better let Nature take her course. But we trusted Nature even less than we trusted ourselves.

"This won't go on at such a pace," we said to each other with spurious consoling. "When a trend hits its peak, where can it go but down?"

"That's the stock market you're thinking of," we said gloomily. "*This* can go plenty of places. All of 'em in the direction of disaster."

I worried in the night; I made drastic decisions. "What do mothers in fiction do?" I asked myself desperately. But no inspired precedent seemed to occur to me. Knowing how it looks in the making, I just don't take fiction as gospel truth.

Days passed; everything passed, except this infatuation.

“Well, there are only a few more weeks of school,” we reminded each other.

“How will that help? Then they’ll have all day to put their minds at rest about each other. We’ve got to *do* something.”

“What did the Capulets and the Montagues do?”

“And look what happened there!”

“We just ought to put our foot down. They’re children.”

“So was the Capulet’s little girl a child.”

“All right. This afternoon I’ll go over and have a frank talk with Mrs. Montague . . . I mean, with Joe’s mother.”

“What’ll you say to her?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’ll issue some kind of ultimatum. I’ll tell her to keep her crazy little boy at home.”

“That’ll be just fine.”

But while I was making up my mind what I *could* tell her, she came to see me. The visit was a shock. For all of us had overlooked the most obvious fact . . . that Joe’s family was probably just as worried as we were. And even more so, because Joe was two years older. And as independent as a drunk sprinkling banana peels under his own feet.

Amazingly enough, she thought it was all our fault. A girl’s parents should keep a tight hand on things. Boys’ parents were different. They didn’t dare.

“One word from us, and Joe does as he pleases,” his mother said frankly. “He’s always been like that. But now, with Boo in there encouraging him, he’s worse than ever. I know what they’re thinking of,” she went on, her voice balancing on a ladder to keep from toppling into tears. “They’re thinking of eloping.”

“They can’t be,” I cried in revulsion.

“Why can’t they?” she asked realistically. “*We* eloped when Joe’s father was nineteen. And we made the mistake of telling Joe about it. Laughing about it, and making quite a story.”

“They couldn’t,” I said dully. “Not Boo.”

“You don’t know her,” she said ominously. “You just don’t see her the way I do.”

But it was that which gave the whole conversation its exhilarating unreality.

It all sounded so fantastic that I kept thinking we were talking about two other guys. Why, the girl Joe's mother was so bitter about was obviously not our dear reasonable child! So naturally, what were *we* worrying about?

She may have been a small and birdlike woman with a tired little ineffectual face, but at least she had a positive idea.

"So we have decided," she said firmly.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that." I rallied up at the words. "What have you decided?"

"That the minute school is out, you had better just send Boo away for a vacation."

I improvised nimbly then, seeing the solution in a blast of clarity. "Why . . . that's exactly what we think you should do about Joe."

"Joe?" she cried indignantly. "That's out of the question."

"And why, may I ask?" I did ask, sounding like one of those fictional mothers I had already rejected as impractical.

"Joe has to go to work this summer. He's got to earn part of his tuition for his first year at college. If they'll let him in, with the grades he's got since Boo took hold of him."

I wanted to scream my protest at these ill-chosen, libelous words, but I restrained myself.

"Besides, there's no place we could send him, even if we had the money," she said, dabbing at her pinched little nose. "We're not people like *you*. We can't gratify every whim. Joe's father works hard for his money. He doesn't just pull it out of the air the way some people seem to."

I swallowed that, trying to keep the real issue and nothing else on the agenda. Always a difficult feat between women. Especially women worried mutually about the bad effect each other's children are having on their own.

"You've probably got dozens of places you could send her. Relatives . . . or to some lovely camp . . . or off to Europe. Anywhere . . . just so it's away!" she said in a crescendo.

"Of course we could send her," I said soothingly. "But how much would that help? Don't you realize what happens when people who're infatuated with each other are forced to be apart?"

“They get over it,” she said firmly, obviously not having read much fiction.

“On the contrary. Imagination just takes over. Fancy and fantasy paint up dreams that are unlimited when there are no realistic facts to be faced every day.”

She looked at me with the pity in her face which most sensible people reserve for writers. I could see her forcing herself not to say what was in her mind. Obviously she wished *both* of us would go somewhere . . . anywhere, just so it was away.

We went on battling the mist for another hour, each of us delicately stabbing the other through the heart. Then it was dangerously near the time high school lets out. She didn’t want Boo to find her here, because of course Boo would then tell Joe and Joe would be furious. So she left.

“Please think about what I’ve said. And you’ll see I’m right,” was her parting remark. She was positive she had the one perfect solution. She left me to see how valid it was. But all I saw was where Joe got his congenital authoritativeness.

I got through the rest of the day, shaken and uncertain. I wanted my own mother more than I’ve needed her for years.

Unexpectedly, when I went up to say goodnight to Boo, I found myself telling her. She looked so solid and sensible lying in her little bed in the moonlit room. We had faced so many minor crises, she and I. Surely this one could be dispelled by the two of us together. . . .

I blurted it out.

“Joe’s mother came to see me today.”

Boo sat up in bed, and the moonlight fell across her face, making it ageless and beautiful in wisdom.

“Poor darling. That must have been trying for you.”

“She’s worried about Joe,” I said.

“What kind of worried?”

“She’s afraid you two youngsters are planning to elope.”

Boo shook her head sadly. “That just shows how little she knows about him,” she said.

My heart leaped up like a Roman candle, and drops of relief, green and golden began running down my private sky.

“She doesn’t understand the boy,” Boo said gently.

I wanted to hug her in my too quickly thawed worry. I wanted to laugh and sing with joy.

“Do *you* understand him?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “Joe would never elope.”

“He wouldn’t?” I said, stretching out the balm to cover all my old aching worry.

“Of course he wouldn’t elope,” she said, sipping her own words as if they were delicious honey. “Joe says that when people really are proud of loving each other, they want everybody in the world to know it.”

“Is that what he says?”

She nodded, and impulsively I kissed the top of her head, which smells as it did when she was a baby, like sweet summer clover in sunshine.

“Joe says that when we get married we’re going to have the biggest wedding money can buy,” she said happily.

So then I knew that Joe’s mother had been right. Sooner or later, however we chose to manage it, Boo would have to go off somewhere. Anywhere, just so it was away.

The Suitcase and the Key

While I was lying awake nights trying to think out the best way for me to behave toward Boo during these dangerous days, I remembered something that happened when *I* was sixteen.

You would never guess to look at me now that I had ever tottered precariously on the edge of being a problem juvenile. I look horribly wholesome now, as if I had been *born* in my right mind. But once I walked blindly along a precipice in blank darkness, never realizing.

There was an alien life which I came within an inch of living, and all that saved me was a wise whisper in a little hallway.

I was having fun; tomorrow's world felt uncertain to me as it always feels to a sixteen-year-old. And besides I was terribly in love.

On Tuesday I had been a chubby-cheeked youngster with no secrets from anybody; by Thursday I was a mysterious woman and a strange man (not quite twenty whom I'd never seen until three weeks before) was in love with me. Naturally my family couldn't understand it; they were middle-aged people almost forty. What did they know about life?

My father's way of dealing with the sudden thing was to dismiss it indignantly. But when he found it wouldn't be dismissed, he got angry. I got tragic. He forbad; I defied, and suddenly in our peaceful little house we had star-crossed lovers. I knew the thrilling beautiful pattern, for I had read some Shakespeare the semester before.

By Friday we wanted to be engaged; my father said if that slippery so-and-so with the Southern accent came around to our front door once more, he'd put the dog on him. My mother tried tactfully to talk to me. But I was enjoying tragedy. Besides, for the first time in my young life, I felt really important, with a stranger and all the grownups in my world upset about me.

It went on for another week, fast and furious. Harvey met me outside the high school gymnasium and we planned everything. I shut myself in my bedroom and packed a little bag . . . Harvey would wait in the drugstore three blocks away, and we would go over to the Union Station in Washington and get a daycoach for Alabama. We'd have a week with Harvey's kinfolks, and when we came back, I'd be the only married woman in the whole high school!

We all went to bed early that night, and when the house was finally quiet,

and all the lights were out, I got up and dressed in the dark. I was doing it, but, being sixteen and romantic, I was also *watching* myself do it. I was so excited I could hardly breathe.

I took the little bag out of the closet and opened my bedroom door noiselessly. I could hear my father's healthy breathing down the hall. There was not another sound in the sleeping house. My Sunday shoes in one hand, my bag in the other, I crept along beside the wall. Then I stopped dead. For there, leaning silently against her door, with her long curly braids over her shoulders, my mother was waiting.

She looked like either a ghost or a girl, certainly no middle-aged mother. She was smiling, and her hands were warm, and she put her finger against her lips and tiptoed along to the head of the hall.

"Ssh," she said as if we were two conspirators. "Don't wake anybody."

"No. I won't," I whispered back, embarrassed because she had caught me. She didn't appear to be alarmed at what I was doing, and she didn't ignore the suitcase.

"I thought you'd need my key," she said. She reached down and took my suitcase, so I could have a free hand to take the key. She laid the key in my hand and it was warm from hers. I think it was the first time I had ever held the key to our family's house.

"Put it in your pocket," she said. "I thought you'd want to go out and think it over, darling. You'll need the key to get in with when you come back, so you won't have to wake up anybody."

I stood there, ready to weep, looking into her kind dear eyes and then down at the key, which somehow seemed to stand for our whole shabby precious house, and our whole family, and all its goings and comings.

"You go out and talk to Harvey," she said, "and then you come in quietly and go to bed."

"All right, Mama," I said, and I took the suitcase which she offered me.

But it was more than a suitcase she gave into my hand; it was her trust in me. She had given me the suitcase and the key, the way out of my own life and the way back into it. She gave them both to me because she trusted me.

I don't know how long I was out of the house; I don't remember what I said to Harvey, drinking cokes in the drugstore. Maybe he was relieved; maybe the whole thing had got a little out of hand for him, too. I don't remember much about Harvey, to tell you the truth, for I didn't know him very well.

But I do remember that I came tiptoeing up the stairs in our house after a while, and down the hall was my father's good innocent breathing. And my mother's blessed little whisper in the darkness.

"That you?"

"Yes, Mama."

"That's my good girl."

She and I never mentioned it as long as she lived. And my father, of course, sublime in his understanding of how to handle women, had never known that it happened.

I have wavered on the brink of lots of temptations since then. Every once in a while I try impetuously to take steps in the wrong direction, hoping I can fool myself. But sooner or later there comes the moment when I remember the suitcase and the key. Then, not wanting to at all . . . being often annoyed with myself because of my inconvenient memory, I hear that little whisper in the darkness.

"That's my good girl."

Hands

Whenever I'm too worried to think intelligently, I work with my hands. It is one of the oldest and best remedies mankind has discovered.

So I ironed today. Usually I have to forego this simple pleasure. I am "spared" this kind of work, alas, so that I can do other things. I am spared it but oftentimes I am homesick for the woman-comfort of it.

Lilliam would never allow me to iron when she was around.

"Jes' you leave that arnin' be," she would say sternly. "You kine of browse when you arn. We ain't got time for you to arn today."

"Nonsense," I used to say defensively. "I can iron either fast or slow. Today I'll do my fast ironing."

"Nome, honey. You better jes' let me arn. I kin arn better than smart people."

I know why I can't iron fast, all right. Lilliam knew also, and sometimes when she was in a frank mood she would tell me plainly. "The whole trouble with you doin' work," she would say, "is you enjoy yo'self too good."

I suppose I am guilty of that. Except when I am worried as I am now, I do enjoy myself pretty good. And enjoyment certainly does use up time.

The stage must be properly set to get the most out of ironing. I know the unleashed architects are building home laundries which look like laboratories or studios, or even like clinics, where ironing may be done scientifically. But for my taste, ironing belongs in a big old-fashioned kitchen, with something good for lunch on the back of the stove. Bean soup, maybe, chuckling in a black iron kettle. Under clean red-checked tea towels, loaves of bread should be "setting," rising and rounding for an hour before they go into the oven.

Outside the kitchen windows there should be a bright dazzle of snow coming down. If there can be a hill in the distance, put children there (children who will never grow up and fall in love). Have them in red mittens, shouting and running with their sleds. While you're imagining, it's no more trouble to include a dog hysterical with joy, capering at their heels.

The kitchen should be warm and smelling of the clean fragrance of starch on a little girl's ruffles. There should be a canary singing somewhere in another part of the house, and if you are blessed by having an old-fashioned

grandmother in the family, it is lovely to think of her rocking in a sunny window, with the darning trudging steadily through her fingers. On one side of her is the tangle of unmatched stockings, each condemned by a hole. She picks them out and scrutinizes them serenely, clucking affectionately at the way people do wear things out; then through one after another she weaves her flash of needle, and mates them into tidy pairs, restoring order to her share of the universe.

If she is a humming grandmother, as my mother would have been, so much the better. It is a comfort to feel that someone who has lived a long time in this turbulent world has a contented heart, singing like a teakettle. Indeed, there is no sight on earth more reassuring than a happy grandmother . . . an old-fashioned one.

I am not an ironer who likes conversation with my work. Talk spoils the whole thing for me, much as I love it at other times. And I certainly do not want any radio turned on, to make me forget what I am doing. No, I want to remember what I am doing, for that is part of the charm of it.

"But the radio is so wonderful."

"Yes, but not so wonderful as thinking."

So there is no daytime serial in my kitchen while I iron. I live my own daytime serial, musing along from subject to subject as my iron travels over the clothes which are dear to me because of the people who wear them. They are dear, yet comical as cartoons, on my ironing board, crippled with wrinkles when I unroll them from the laundry basket, and then plumped into their right shape by my iron. My thoughts are built along with this parade that passes under my hands; the precious present and the lovely past meet here, and I think with a rush of gratitude that I would not trade my living, troublesome and crowded as it sometimes feels, for any better way on earth.

I see with a pang how far along the ironing board Boo's skirts extend now, and I remember the time, so lately past, when a skirt was only a little more than a foot long.

Just a little while ago, clothes were made to play in. Now they are chosen to be the lyrics set to the music of living. They are romantic as valentines, because the girl who wears them has discovered that life is to be lived by the heart.

I remember those little clothes with wistfulness. An absurd little woolen frock she once adored, with a fluff of angora around the neck. "Fliff," she used to call it. "I simply love the fliff! It's *practically* fur, isn't it? Well, baby fur,

anyway."

And the ridiculous little pink things.

"You know Mary-Jane Francy?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you know her mother?"

"Um-hum."

"Well . . . do you know *what*?"

"No. What?"

"Well. Her mother lets her wear silk wonderwhere . . . with lace on the panties!"

Why should those memories make my eyes prickle? I have her still, and this agony of mine will pass, as the measles came and went . . . and the little girl who maliciously forgot to invite her to the birthday party . . .

My mother before me liked to iron. I probably inherit the joy, as I inherit much else from her overspilling heart. I remember how happily I used to see her at this work, her face flushed, her hair curly with warmth.

My mother used to say, "I hope we never get to be so prosperous that I can't do my own ironing."

We girls would look at her in amazement. "Why, Mrs. Davidson says she simply loathes ironing," we would tell her. "I don't believe I ever heard of anyone really liking ironing."

"Well, *I* like it," my mother would say. "It gives you such a good chance to just stand quietly thinking about the people you love best in the whole world. What could be better than that?"

"But, of course, you *could* think about us without the bother of ironing," we reminded her.

"No. It's not the same," she'd say wisely. "Ironing gives you a chance to think your love, and then a chance to do something about it."

My mother reveled in the way she loved her home and us. She never made any secret of it. She never said anything about giving us the best years of her life. On the contrary. She often told us that *we* were giving *her* the best years of her life.

"I love every day that passes," she used to say. "I wouldn't want to skip

one day of having you children small and then getting bigger. This is the very best time of my life, and I know it."

And this, I know, is the best time of *my* life. Despite the comical-tragic nonsense that is so serious to us all at this minute . . . I know it is the best, for our hearts are being exercised, whether we want them to be or not.

I have gone a long way from the ironing. And suddenly I know I feel better. I cannot say just why I do, for nothing is really changed. The big worry waits patiently to be looked at and honored. But somehow I feel the deep abiding happiness of being alive.

The Bible explains it very simply; it says, "Lift up your heart with your hands."

Maybe that's what hands are for, when minds admit defeat.

The Bookkeeping

Now I could THINK more calmly. Which is another way of saying, Now I could pray, and not just run in circles.

Should we all just go to Europe? Even if we had the money, would that be the cure? Could I find some counter-revolution at home . . . some boy who would out-joe Joe? Winthrop? Obviously that was wistful wishing.

Summer camp at this stage of the conflagration would be much too juvenile and tame; sending her to visit practically any of our friends would be unjust and unfair . . . to them. Like the feeble-minded boy in the story who found the lost cow by imagining where he himself would go if he were a cow, I tried to picture what would have diverted me when I was sixteen . . . in such a situation. I got out a pencil and wrote down the emotions involved, balancing them on each side the page, the way people balance debits and credits. (I discovered then that one reason I've never been able to fathom mathematics in any form except intuition is that I've always done bookkeeping with emotions instead of figures.)

But somehow that seemed to clarify the problem. Not the solution, but the problem. What we needed here was an emotion stronger than love. What emotion would that be, for pity's sake? Well, how about the Joan of Arc urge? The clarion call of doing-something-heroic-to-help. . . . But what could Boo help? And what had she to help *with*? I thought over her assets, my pencil poised to write them down in my crazy mathematics. Then across my mind floated a wisp of dialogue she and I had had a while ago when she wanted us to buy a car in partnership.

" 'What've you got to contribute?' " I had asked.

" 'Why . . . I've got a hundred and eighty dollars . . . and a driver's license.' "

There it was, all her assets. Now I was feverish with a plan. I would have to begin with a telephone call across the country to my father.

I could barely wait for Boo to come home from school.

By miracle she came in alone. Joe was having to take a special examination to see if he could possibly get through Chemistry and graduate.

"Maybe I should have sat on the steps and waited for him," she said. "But I thought that might just worry him more."

“Is he worried?”

“Of course. Who isn’t?” she said, and my heart twisted painfully at the touching terribleness of being young, with all the cards stacked against you. But I had to keep my end of them more firmly stacked.

“I’m worried here, also,” I said.

“About us?”

“What would I be worried about you for?”

“Well, I just thought.”

“No. I’m worried about Granddaddy.”

“What’s the matter?” All her sympathies sprang to attention, for she loves that gallant little man, as do we all.

“He needs some help right now. I talked to him on the phone this morning.”

“What kind of help? Just tell me. I’m old enough. I’ve got a right to worry about other people, you know. I’m not a child.”

“W.B. can’t drive his car for a few weeks. He’s having some treatments for his eyes. And meantime he can’t drive at all.”

“Oh the poor darling,” she said. “And he’s somebody that likes to get around. You know he’s always got a lot of projects and stuff. And there he’d be stuck out in the country!”

I said, not being quite enough of a culprit to meet her dear eyes, “You know what? If I had the money . . . and didn’t have so much work to do here . . . I’d just. . . .”

“What would you do?”

“I’d just go out there and drive for him myself this summer.”

“What would we do here without you?”

“You’d just have to manage.”

“Yes, I suppose we would,” she said, her face brooding over the problem. It looked then that we had come to a dead-end street. Ineptly I had put out a suggestion and had included an alternative that canceled out the whole thing. For the twentieth time in my life, I realized that for me not only is honesty the best policy, but the only one. If shenanigans are required, I can be counted on to muff the whole thing.

She went into her own room, and I heard her puttering around aimlessly. I yearned for an X-ray that would show me what was going on inside her mysterious little head.

I sat on at my desk, more discouraged than ever. Then she came to my door and looked in apologetically.

"I've been thinking," she said. "What's the matter with *me*?"

"What'd you mean?"

"What's the matter with me going out to drive Granddaddy?"

"Why . . . what an idea!"

"I've got a driver's license . . . and I've got a hundred and eighty dollars for my fare across the country."

"Oh, but darling . . ." I protested, for sheer luck-stretching. "I think maybe I'd better just forget the work, and go myself."

"May I speak frankly?" she asked, and I said, "Of course."

"I wouldn't have a comfortable moment, for worrying about you. You're a nice woman, but you're beyond the pale as a driver."

"Am I?" I said, making a mental note that when I next counted up my own personal credits and debits, I'd put my driving stupidity at the top of my list of assets.

"I'm the logical one to go," she said firmly. "And besides. . . ."

"Besides?"

"Joe would want me to do it. Joe always wants me to do the right thing."

I almost put down my head on my desk and wept at the goodness of the two of them.

But she didn't notice. For already her mind had begun making pictures about the whole thing.

"We could write to each other," she said.

My honesty, almost extinct in this scene, aroused itself.

"You know you're not at your best in writing," I said.

"I know that," she admitted. "I'm practically illiterate."

"Would Joe find it repulsive that you can't spell?"

She thought morosely about that horrible danger. Then she said bravely, “Well, he would have to know it someday.”

“You’d be taking a terrible chance with Joe,” I warned, trying in spite of caution to lay the situation bare.

Then she said something that almost undid me.

“If this thing is as good as we hope it is, neither distance nor spelling can chop it down.”

So then I knew we were facing eternity itself. But for now, we had to deal with time expediently.

Too Much Particular

We had our ups and downs with Tumpti; that was just normal. Indeed, if someone had been keeping a graph of our life together, it would have resembled a precipitous mountain range. But Everest occurred when we didn't expect it. Our big worry was Boo, and we gullibly assumed that every other trouble would momentarily retreat. But that was reckoning without Tumpti.

Trouble with him usually followed a reliable pattern. If it was suggested that Tumpti do something that he didn't choose to do, our seventy-year-old houseman placidly said, "I leave. You get nother boy." Then, naturally, we let him do exactly as he pleased. We usually felt frustrated, but we were always well cared for and well nourished. And our household, always tottering on the threat of explosion, didn't have a moment of boredom.

This trouble struck just after we passed through one of our regular crises, brought about because we had invited friends for a barbecue. Tumpti had appeared to be cooperating. But at the last moment he unaccountably decided to serve a black-tie dinner in the dining room, setting the table with our only imported linen and our precious Irish Belleek china, which we usually keep behind glass.

The effect was ludicrous, for we had urged our guests to come wearing Levis and plaid shirts, either in or hanging out. So, dead-pan, we sat down to the restrained occasion looking as if Amy Vanderbilt had meticulously composed her most formal table and dinner, absent-mindedly forgetting that she had invited as guests a gang of sharecroppers on relief.

The only correct person in the room was Tumpti, and he rebukingly looked down his nose at us all (or as down as a little man not quite five feet tall *can* look).

But he had had his way, and he was happy. And the meal he served was so excellent that you couldn't possibly mention any discrepancies to him. Especially since the discrepancies were *ours*, and in no way his. Furthermore, you couldn't mention them on a full stomach, purring with pleasure.

I was working at my desk the next day, thinking this was a perfect example of the right strategy in dealing with our help. You see, I had picked up some of his necessity for saving face, and I called our method "strategy." But suddenly my harmless, time-wasting musing was shattered.

Boo came to the door of my workroom.

“Sorry to trample over your working hours,” she said. “But you’d better come downstairs. Tumpti is leaving.”

“What about?”

“He says you’re much too particular. In some ways I agree with him.”

Apprehensively I got up from the desk, knowing I wouldn’t get back before tomorrow.

“He’s real mad,” she warned me. “Profanity . . . both Japanese and American.”

“It’s called English,” I said automatically.

“This is American.”

I started militantly downstairs, my steps becoming more tentative and timid as I approached the kitchen. I mapped out my battle plan. Would I need bribery . . . flattery . . . or *more* flattery? Tumpti was standing beside the kitchen counter muttering to himself in a whisper that could be heard next door.

“What’s all this?” I asked in a craven voice.

“Too much particular,” he said, his eyes gray as eels and angry as serpents. “Embroidered table linen too hard to iron. Straw mats better. Just wipe straw mats.” He pantomimed the carefree wiping.

A drench of relief poured over me. “Oh . . . table linen!” I said, trying to sound as indignant as he did. “Who cares about table linen?” Naturally I wouldn’t remind him that he was the one who had injected the big linen tablecloth into the scene. “We send tablecloths out to the laundry.”

“Can’t go to raundry,” he said bitterly. “Raundry tear ’em up. Raundry Chinese.”

Now I perceived this was an international incident. “Oh, I know a very good French laundry. I’ll take everything down there this afternoon.”

He shook his head furiously. “I trust nobody with best linen. I have to wash it myself. You too much particular.”

In this dilemma I thought that looking meek was indicated. So I looked loathsomely meek. But that only reminded him of other indignities he was suffering.

“China too thin,” he said. “Break like eggshells. Man busts out in perspiration when china in dishpan.” With sinking heart, I had a clue to what

all this meant. We were going to be punished because some of the precious Belleek china had been broken! I could have wept about that. But I didn't. I went on looking craftily meek.

"We won't use that china again," I said as if I were making a great concession. "Old china anyway. Hundred years old. Too thin besides. Makes everybody uncomfortable. Everybody burst out in perspiration."

He let his eely eye swim around and look at my face, and almost he relented. But then he shook his head and whipped up his anger. His whole face seemed to explode in rage.

"No!" he shouted. "I stay here too long anyway. I rike new job. New people. I tiled of you."

At that moment I thought recklessly that I'd like to tell him I was pretty tiled of him. But I didn't. Instead, I surprised myself by saying, "Well, Tumpti, you're a free man. You'll have to work wherever you please. If you're tired of us, I guess you'd better just leave. . . ." Then my firmness came unstarched, and I heard myself muttering in a quick gulp, ". . . and after you've tried some other family for a while, maybe you'll want to come back to us."

He was shaking his head vigorously, and to my amazement I saw tears were also in *his* eyes.

"I work too long here," he said stubbornly. "I need new place. Place where I just pay 'tention to the cooking and the looms and the raundry. No bother about the people."

Incredulously I heard what he was not saying; he was admitting that he loved us all too much for his own Oriental comfort. I felt like putting my arms around him as I would have around any other lonely little waif and saying, "Don't be afraid of loving people too much. It won't hurt you. And even if it does. . . ." But of course I couldn't do any of that; I couldn't trespass upon his dignity by letting him see that I understood him.

We stood there helplessly, two human beings tragically separated by the incongruity of age and sex and nationality. So we just stood there, both trying our best to look angry and indignant.

"So I reave. You get nother boy," he said, taking out a handkerchief and blowing his tiny nose.

"All right, if that's the way you want it," I muttered fiercely.

Then we both rallied up to make the moment less tense and difficult for each other. We both spoke at once.

I said, “Perhaps you have a point, Tumpti. And you could come and see us whenever you wanted to.”

He was saying, “Anyway, I go back to Japan plitty soon. State Department of U.S.A. say maybe I can go. Maybe not. But can’t come back again.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t want to leave the United States for good!” I cried. “You told me you’ve been away fifty years.”

“Since 1903 . . . I rike to see if anything happen while I gone away.”

We talked about that obliquely for a few minutes, and then suddenly he wanted to tell me something very important.

“Now I leave your house, I tell you my big pran. You keep secret?”

“Of course,” I said, having no idea what was coming.

“You wait here. I show you something.” He went into his room, and I heard him unlocking his trunk. In a few moments he came back, holding in his arms a huge paper-wrapped parcel. His face was utterly beaming; all the anger of a moment ago had ebbed away and now he was beatific as a man is in the presence of his greatest treasure, whether it be a faded photograph or a bank book with the newest ink still damp.

“I show you,” he said, and laid the huge parcel on a chair while he got out a clean cloth and wiped the already spotless counter energetically. He was murmuring in a counterpoint of Japanese and English, not to me, but to his valuable bundle.

He laid the big package, which looked like some kind of a rug or counterpane on the counter and untied the string around it. Eagerly then he opened the wrappings and took out what now appeared to be a huge flag.

But it was like no flag I’ve ever seen before. It was made of heavy rich silk, and it was embroidered all over in tiniest petit point. The flag itself had stars, and a rising sun and a rainbow, also a moon and cloud-tipped mountains. A flattened-out globe which included all the continents occupied the center space. It was quite well drawn, and fastidiously embroidered. A garland of flowers framed a kind of banner across the top, and on this was a motto which said “New World of Brotherly Peace.” At the bottom of this remarkable creation was a modest inscription, embroidered in sky blue, which said, “Dr. Frank Frederick Ishinara, First President of New World.”

One last corner of the flag was still unfinished, like the cloudy portion at the bottom of the Stuart portrait of George Washington.

Tumpti gazed at it lovingly, and in his thin little neck I could see a pulse wildly beating. This was one of the great moments of his life.

"I never show frag before," he said reverently. "Some day I show Plesident of U.S.A. Then I give him my pran for New World of Brotherly Peace. Then he make me First Plesident."

I gazed at it in silence, unable to speak.

"You made it?" I gasped.

"I make," he beamed, and with one finger he delicately touched a spray of minute lilies-of-the-valley which he had embroidered on the garland. "I begin ten years ago when U.S.A. Government send all Japanese people to stay in Arkansas. I have big dleam then. I make pran."

Now the mystery of his long evenings in his room without newspaper, radio, or book was explained. Now was explained his eccentricity about insisting upon big 200-watt bulbs in his lamp.

But over all that . . . a horrifying thought was spreading across my mind. Why, the dear little man into whose hands we had literally given our lives, was obviously quite insane. For months at the helm of our house had been a madman!

A frightening montage swept over me . . . his rages, his eccentricities which had seemed mere conversation pieces with which we amused our friends . . . his determination to have his way. . . . All of it, I saw in the light of this monumental madness to which he had devoted his last ten years, fitted together now, the parts of a picture of mental derangement.

He was looking at me expectantly. I was supposed to say something worthy of what he had just shown me.

"I . . . I just haven't any words," I said in all sincerity.

That seemed to satisfy him, and he chuckled, and once again his fingers moved lovingly over the infinitesimal stitches.

"Sometime I tell you all about my pran," he said expansively. "Now you know. So now I cannot work in your house. Not be light. You feel bad because First Plesident of New World of Brotherly Peace do raundry in your house."

"No, I don't believe it would be right," I said in some relief. Then he had a big thought and he said to me, bowing ceremoniously, "Maybe when I be First Plesident, I make you Secletally of Rabor."

I went back upstairs to my desk, shaking all over. Boo was sitting on the

floor trying to read one of the French books people deludedly give me for Christmas.

She said, not looking up, “Expect you fixed everything. Hmn?”

“You mean about Tumpti?”

“I don’t mean Rock Hudson,” she said absently, this being the correct answer these days to a stupid question.

“He’s leaving,” I said, trying not to sound too stunned. “We’re driving him over to a storage warehouse to arrange something about some trunks he has there. He’s leaving this very afternoon. You’re driving me to the hairdresser’s at three, and we’ll drop him off at the warehouse first.”

“Whee . . . when that little guy makes up his mind, he doesn’t loiter, does he?”

“We both made up our minds,” I said.

“Yeah? I can imagine,” she said cheerfully. “When Tumpti’s around, there’s only one mind to make up.”

It wasn’t a comfortable, relaxing permanent I had that day. All the time my favorite operator was telling me about her social life I was worrying about our home situation. Here for months we had been exposed to a completely mad person, and we had never suspected. Anything could have happened. Horror headlines danced before my imagination. Something had spared us all, including poor little Tumpti.

Well, tonight he would be sleeping in the stark Japanese roominghouse where once a week he paid for a modest pocket of a room. His mysterious trunk and the framed sampler of stones he had collected while he was the government’s guest in Arkansas would be safely out of our house. Should I warn anyone, and if so, whom?

When my permanent was finished (looking too pristine), I telephoned home for someone to come and get me in the car. Boo, always expecting (and usually getting some momentous private call), answered the phone.

“Oh . . . it’s you,” she said in disappointment.

“Sorry,” I said glumly.

“Well, I’ve got a lovely surprise for you,” she cried brightly. “Guess what?”

“You know I never can guess anything.”

“Tumpti’s not leaving.”

“He’s not?”

“Nope. He came from the warehouse about half an hour ago. I persuaded him to stay.”

“You did? What did you say to him?”

“I just persuaded him,” she said happily. “I said, ‘Tumpti, please don’t go.’ So he said, ‘Ar-light. I stay.’ ”

Nother Boy

Our very house seemed to be crumbling to pieces between the two problems, Boo and now Tumpti. I couldn't decide what was the best thing to do about Tumpti. Suppose I fired him, and that made him really angry enough to do something desperate? I could not face such a vision.

On the other hand, suppose I didn't fire him. And *then* something violent happened?

In the dilemma, I told nobody about the flag and the world plan. In some moments I called myself criminally irresponsible; at other times I assured myself that we had been at his mercy a couple of years with nothing serious happening. Just because I now understood the situation, the danger had not heightened. But of course I wasn't comfortable about it all.

As days went past and he seemed gentler and more mild, I decided that the world plan was probably not much worse than the private madness which most of us cherish in one form or another. Certainly it was no worse than a few of the schemes that the press expose as motivating some of our senators and congressmen. Arousing no suspicion, some of the hermetically sealed skulls around us every day may actually be time bombs ticking silently toward catastrophe. The dream of Utopia has plagued the race for centuries, and it usually seems a ludicrous dementia when it seeps out of a fermenting brain into speech or deed.

The light shining through the tightly drawn blinds in Tumpti's room continued to illumine the magnolia tree until midnight. So I knew the empty space at the bottom of the flag was being meticulously filled in, stitch by almost invisible stitch.

And then the United States Government stepped into the situation. In the years that he had been with us, no mail ever had come for him. But on this morning there was a legal-sized envelope, with the insignia of our State Department engraved in the corner. It was addressed to Dr. Frank Frederick Ishinara. He received it with silent dignity, as if he were quite accustomed to such missives. I could barely control my curiosity, but I knew I must not ask until information was volunteered.

I could not read in the ancient puzzle of his face whether my government was saying, "Now, my children, you will be safe from having a dear madman in your house. We are letting him go to Japan," or whether it was decreeing,

“He cannot leave the country. Keep him until something ghastly happens, and then blame yourself the rest of your life.”

I had to wait nearly a week, full of suspense and anxiety. Then one afternoon a huge truck drove up to our house, and men began carrying in three heavy trunks from the storage warehouse. Still we said nothing, as if this were ordinary daily procedure. But the next day I heard strange noises in the patio, and there was Tumpti, dressed in his best suit with his big scholarly glasses on his little nose, and he was working at an amazing business. He had tape measure and saw, and standing around waiting were enormous garden tools, almost as tall as he was. An opened empty trunk was ready to be packed. Methodically he was taking measurements, and in a few minutes he was sawing the handles off the big forks and hoes and rakes, and fitting them into the trunk. How he had managed to bring all this garden equipment into the house without anyone seeing him, I couldn’t imagine.

He had sacks of seeds, and boxes of bulbs waiting to be packed, and even some bare-root shrubs and fruit trees. With incredible efficiency he got the whole trunk put together, and one knew that somewhere across the world there would soon be a garden planted from America in Japanese soil.

But mostly what I knew was that the answer to our dangerous question had been decided by the omnipotent government. He had been given permission to go back to Japan, and he was taking as much of America with him as possible.

Within a half-hour, as I peeped through the Venetian blinds at him, I saw the trunk securely locked. Then he brushed up the sawdust with a whisk broom, and carried it tidily away. He and I never mentioned the trunkful of garden which would link his America with his Japan, but I couldn’t help knowing it was more than mere garden to him.

What went into the other trunks I never happened to discover, but I am sure it was equally symbolic merchandise. When all his preparations for departure were finished, he got around to telling us about it, as casually as if he was saying he was going to a motion picture on his day off.

“Nex Monday I reave for Japan,” he said. “You want I help you find nother boy?”

“No. I’ll look,” I said. “It won’t be easy to find someone like you, Tumpti. You’ve been so good to us.”

“I no good,” he said fiercely. “I ve’y bad cook. Mebbe I too old to crean looms good.” It was the first time he had ever suggested he had any age at all. And of course we all denied it from our hearts.

I spent the week talking to impossible applicants. We half expected that Tumpti would change his mind at the last moment, even though we knew his going was officially stamped and sealed by the Japanese Consulate and our own State Department. We just couldn't believe it would really happen. For he was part of us, and we couldn't imagine it any other way. Even I, knowing what I did about him, couldn't want him banished beyond our care.

He was supposed to leave at eleven o'clock Monday morning. Nobody in our house made any pretense of going down to the office, or off to school, or upstairs to work at a desk. There wasn't anything we could do to help him, for he wouldn't even let us drive him down to Terminal Island, where he was embarking on a Japanese freighter.

"I take taxi," he said. "Dr. Ishinara got plitty much money saved up. Work fifty-four years and don't spend much money."

To our knowledge he had spent practically no money, except for the varnished little pastries and such gifts which he brought to us on Friday mornings after his days off.

At last he was ready and standing in the hall with one very small satchel beside his highly polished brown shoes. He was wearing the too big Homburg, which we hadn't seen since the day he came applying for the job. And he had ensconced the huge teeth in his old babyish mouth.

Somehow he looked like a beloved child disguised as an old man for a make-believe journey. At the last moment he seemed much too small and much too old for us to let him venture out alone into a world he expected to find unchanged while his back had been turned upon it. I held my hands gripped before me, so they wouldn't stray out and touch him with helpless affection, for I knew that would disgrace us all beyond remedying. I would lose face forever, and he would lose face with himself because he had spent time working for such people . . . and even forgetting his principles so far as to love them.

"Well, goodbye," we all said, much too loudly. "Now you take care of yourself, Tumpti."

Boo said desperately, still with a remnant of faith in her power to persuade, "Don't go, Tumpti . . . dear."

His way of dealing with that was to pretend not to hear it.

"Everybody has to go someplace. But please don't you go. We need you here, Tumpti dear," she said, and *she* didn't care if she did lose face, for she frankly scuffed tears across her nose.

“You get along fine after I reave,” he said. “I no good for anybody.” He grinned with desperation matching Boo’s. And as if he were on a tightrope he balanced his enormous teeth astride the grin.

“Now I go Japan,” he said explosively. “U.S.A. Government tell me go, but don’t come back ever. U.S.A. Government say they get nother boy.”

The End

The last nine days of school were a merry-go-round gone crazy. Nobody was sure Joe was going to graduate. His father wouldn't let him buy the required blue coat and gray trousers until it was definite.

"If I didn't have to use my money for the railway fare, I'd buy 'em for him," Boo said. "What's convention anyway? We're here to help each other, aren't we?"

Meantime her cheerless, brave preparation for her trip went on. She was to leave the day after school closed. With Joe's troubles hanging over her, she couldn't seem to care about buying new clothes, or thinking about the ones she had. For all of us, it was the end of the world.

But we got through it somehow. At least we got through seven days of it. But we hadn't reckoned on Joe. For suddenly when we thought everything was going to work out safely, Joe smashed it all to smithereens.

I don't know what he actually said to her. I only know that she came home from school looking utterly tragic. And this time it wasn't play-tragic. This was real.

"Joe's finished with me," she said.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Just that. He's through. He doesn't want anybody in his life who's such a . . . a pushover."

My hands went suddenly cold. "You'd better explain it, dear."

"You know, all right," she said bitterly. "Joe's mother told him all about it. She said that you and she agreed that I had better be sent away someplace this summer. Out of Joe's way."

"We didn't agree," I said lamely.

"Whatever you want to call it. Anyway, you fixed up a little trap and let me walk into it. You fixed it so I would think I was getting a big ole inspiration about helping Granddaddy this summer. And all the time. . . ."

She angrily snatched the tears off her eyelashes, and turned her face from me. It was the first time in our sixteen years together that I had deceived her. It made not the slightest difference to me that I had done it for what I thought

was her sake. I had deceived her, and that was the truth. I had committed that most heinous of all affronts . . . I had meddled and managed in such a way that it looked like her free choice, when it was not.

I have no idea what I said about it. But she wouldn't accept it at all. She just stood there with her face turned away, and she kept shaking her head in rejection. Rejecting what I said, and me along with the words.

"Don't talk about it," she kept saying. "There's nothing anybody can say. So just don't let's talk."

I never felt worse in my life. I just sat helplessly convicted with no defense to offer. She went out of the room, and walked around the house a few minutes, and then she came back.

"But I'm going on the trip anyway," she said. "The only honest thing in the situation is that Granddaddy really needs me. Or is that just part of your trap?"

"No. That's the truth," I said shakily.

"So I'm going. And I'm glad to be out of this house. As a matter of fact, I'll need a few weeks to feel better about what you did to me."

"Please, darling. . . ."

"Besides . . . with Joe through with me, what would I do in this place? What could I possibly do?"

Bon Voyage

School closed. Joe got his job in the supermarket. At the last minute, it was decided he was going to graduate after all. But none of that changed his mind about Boo.

"I don't blame him," was her only comment.

I couldn't get near to her. We talked pleasantly; we did everything we had to do; the surface looked normal and fine. But underneath there was nothing but chasm, she on one side, a tiny lonely figure, and I on the other side, guilty and sick at heart.

Everything I had learned from my own life had seemed to fail me. The very rocks of my conviction had become shimmering mists. I had failed; with all the wisdom I thought I had . . . inherited, borrowed, and sculptured from my own experience . . . I had failed when the real test came. Unlike the victorious British, I had won all the battles, but I had lost the war.

My optimistic common sense tried to tell me that someday we should both remember this spring and be able to laugh together. A whole childhood of understanding had bound us together; surely nothing this size could separate us forever.

But for this moment, nothing helped. There were times when she threw herself totally into the idea of being important to her grandfather. When she talked on the telephone to her friends, she sounded like her real self. She even mentioned Joe once or twice on the phone.

"Oh, Joe? Why, he'll get along okay," she said to Felicity. "I'm not the only girl in the world."

"I'll say you're not," Felicity said, practically licking her chops.

But Joe didn't telephone once. A few days ago he had been expecting to take her to the Union Station to make sure everything was in order and her roomette was going to be comfortable. Joe had planned to check on the Southern Pacific and hold 'em up to their contract. . . Every time the phone or the doorbell rang, my treacherous hopes sprang up. But it was never his lazy casual voice that said, "Hi there, folkses." When Joe was through, he was finished.

During her last afternoon, she suddenly decided that she didn't want anybody but our own family to see her off at the station. I know that was

because she was too proud to let her contemporaries see how things were. She called up all the youngsters she had invited and asked them not to come.

"Okay," they said obligingly, not caring too much one way or the other.

To me, she said brutally, "Let's don't make any more of this than we have to. I'm going away and that's all there is to it."

"You're going to have a fine summer, darling. And after you finish helping W.B. you'll have that lovely visit in New York."

"Yep."

The station with everyone hurrying and laden with luggage, was exciting. Every once in a while she looked behind us through the crowd, as if she were expecting someone . . . as if she hoped, by some miracle, someone tall and tan would be coming through the crowd . . . maybe just *happening* to be there. But there was no Joe.

The roomette was a diversion. The whole train was a novelty, for she had never actually been on a train before. There was all the etiquette of tipping and ordering meals, and having a ginger ale in the club car, to be considered. And in spite of our crushing trouble, it was quite thrilling. We admired everything, and said what we needed to say in an aside to the big fatherly porter, and then we got off the train. And still she had not looked into my face with recognition.

We huddled drearily on the dark platform. Each lighted window along the car had a happy-looking traveler mouthing messages to a group like ourselves on the platform. I looked up at the row of small lighted stages, and I saw a number of youngsters like our own. There were both boys and girls, and the sight cheered me. She would have fun; in a few hours she would have forgotten us all. Even Joe. She'd feel the welling up of that lively curiosity of hers about everything new. She would soon be humming along the back of her mind, the way she always does. This nightmare would fade in a day or so, and both of us would know that it wasn't as ghastly as it seemed now. When we met again in a couple of months one of us could say to the other, "What was that all about?"

I tried to believe all this, but somehow I couldn't manage it. Suppose she never forgave me, as I never should forgive myself? I wanted to beg her . . . I wanted to explain . . . but I knew that words are sometimes the most expensive and dangerous luxuries between the generations. She herself would have to make the journey between hurt and understanding, and I would have to stand by and wait humbly.

She stood up and pulled down the little folding hook provided on the wall

for her coat. But really she was trying to look along the platform, hoping that Someone would happen to be arriving at the last minute. But Nobody was.

I yearned to give her something right now which she could accept. So I decided to tell her about all the other youngsters on the train. Then she would put on her new lipstick and go out to dinner expecting adventure. Then she could shake off the memory of all of us who had hurt her.

I spoke the good news with elaborate pantomime. “The train is jumping with kids,” I said. She couldn’t understand. For one thing her roomette was brightly lighted, and we were standing in the twilight of the dusky platform. I repeated it several times, and still she wrinkled her eyebrows and shook her head uncomprehendingly.

Then I opened a book I was carrying and wrote the message in big letters along the flyleaf.

“Kids! Millions of ’em on the train.” I held it up over my head for her to read. She tried her best to make out the words. She tried and tried, and finally shrugged her failure. I know despair was shameless on my face. Then a look of understanding spread over her face. She got out a piece of note paper from her handbag, and I watched her golden hair sift across her cheek as she bent her face to answer what she believed I had written.

She wrote and wrote, with her tongue clamped between her teeth the way she wrote when she was seven. At last she held up the big-lettered words for me to read.

“I love you, too,” she had written.

Everything was going to be all right. It didn’t matter now whether or not she saw that I was crying. She had correctly read the words I had not dared to write, so I could trust her also to read the tears. . . .

The conductors bawled their last “All aboard,” the train gave a shudder, and suddenly began to move, groaning heavily like a fat rheumatic. Her little window became foreshortened; she pressed her forehead against the glass, we waved in a frenzy and then we couldn’t see her at all. We turned away and started up the long platform, looking, I am sure, weary and middle-aged and already lonely. But I was not feeling weary nor middle-aged. I wanted to run and do nip-ups, for now at last I felt happy and forgiven.

Then someone crashed into us, someone tall and tan, carrying a gardenia in a transparent box.

“Gosh, I’m a little late,” Joe said.

“You’re awful late, honey,” I cried deliriously.

“I’ve . . . I’ve got a corsage for her,” he stammered. “I think they’re awful silly. But I knew she wanted one.”

Joe, the super-authority, was gulping and looking as if he were going to cry.

“I wanted to say goodbye to her,” he muttered lugubriously. “I thought maybe I’d kiss her goodbye. That’s silly, too, but girls like it.”

“Well, kiss me goodbye,” I said. For his worried young face shook my heart. After all, you cannot love one youngster without loving them all.

That’s the life sentence given you when you take one of them into your life forever.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected or standardised.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been corrected or standardised.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

[The end of *Miss Boo Is Sixteen* by Margaret Lee Runbeck]