

Experience

ELIZABETH was in her room. She knew that "the folks" worried about her when she sat there alone. Once in a while her mother came to the door, usually on some pretext. "Dad and I are going to pick the berries. Don't you want to come out with us, Elizabeth?" She nearly always said no. She would rather be alone, living over, in sweet, wounding detail, now this and now that moment with Harold. But then she would get to thinking of them out there talking about her in low voices, how dad stepped carefully about the house with a solemn face, and mother's painful little efforts to be ordinary and cheerful; and she would have to go down.

Everything about "the folks" hurt her, too. Sometimes she went into their bedroom and looked at the wedding photograph on the wall. When she was a child, she used to ask wonderingly, "Was this you, Mamma? Was this really Papa?" she didn't think it looked like them at all. And she was quite impressed.

Then later, that first summer when she was at home from college, when Margie was visiting her, she took Margie in and they giggled together over the way dad's hair was curled, and the way they both stood there against a background of charcoal clouds. The *clothes!*

"Just look at mother's pishy knot!"

With eyes of horrified laughter, they counted all the little satin ruffles on mother's dress.

"Look how the skirt hikes up in the front, though! Women all wore corsets that stuck out in front. They didn't have garters fastened to them, or something. Look at that little curl over dad's left eyebrow! Isn't it sweet? Look at dad's ringlets!"

Mother heard them and met them just as they were escaping into the hall.

"What are you girls finding to amuse you so?"

They looked at each other—Margie a little scared—and giggled.

"I just wanted Marge to see how sweet you and dad looked when you got married."

"Oh, was that it?"

Mother laughed. She made fun of the picture, too. But she went on into the room and Elizabeth saw her standing in front of it with half-smiling, remote expression, and then turn away.

How could she ever have thought of it like that? Now she stole in all by herself; and the look of those two young faces with the rounded cheeks and serious, innocent eyes hurt her so that her throat ached. They had been *young*. She thought of all that had happened to them since that picture was taken, and she didn't see how they could bear it. Their first baby had died. Elizabeth used to feel important saying to the other children, "I had a little sister that died before I was born." She felt very pleased when mother told her to gather flowers to decorate the little sister's grave on Memorial Day, because the family had a lot where she could put flowers; and then she remembered how she had come dashing into the house with her bouquet—"Look, Mamma! Look what I've picked!"—and how through the open kitchen doorway she had seen mamma with her head on papa's shoulder and papa kissing her.

Why were they doing that? she had wondered.

She heard her mother now at the foot of the stairs.

"Elizabeth! Dad and I are going to drive out in the country and get a chicken. Won't you come along?"

She waited a moment, scarcely breathing. She couldn't bear to hurt them by refusing . . . but when she thought of the wedding picture she knew she couldn't stand the sight of their faces, to have to realize that they could get old and die.

"I guess not."

A pause.

"What are you doing, darling?"

"Just reading."

She waited, rigid, and heard them drive away.

She stole into the bedroom again and looked into the innocent eyes in the picture. How pretty they were—both of them! Yes, dad too, with those silly ringlets, and those nice dark eyes. It seemed terrible to her that they must lose their beauty.

She used to tease mother about buying that "complete beauty program" from the woman with hennaed hair who was going around selling toilet articles. When she or Charles took snapshots, mother always tried to get out of them. "What do you want *me* in it for?" Charles and Elizabeth thought she was silly. But now it seemed to Elizabeth that she understood only too well how mother glanced at the mirror and quickly away.

She looked around the bedroom with its white curtains and its lowered shades. It used to be just "the folks' room" to her. Now it was breathing with strange half-secrets and open intimations all around her. She saw the big bed where she used to sleep with mother when she was ill. She saw the closet where they kept their clothes, and the worn familiar intimacy of their toilet things on the dresser. Had they been happy with each other, as she and Harold had been once? She seemed to feel

piling upon her all their years and years of being together . . . until she realized all at once, all over again, with new blinding pain, what she had lost.

Oh, Harold, Harold . . . she couldn't stand it. She ran into her own room, flung herself across the bed, cried and cried.

After an uncharted time, she lay still in that drained apathy after tears that she had come to know. She saw her own wrists flung lax on the counterpane. Now she could think about Harold again. She knew that her mother and father wished she wouldn't "brood"; but they did not understand the torturing consolation of going over and over her brief drama of happiness. She hadn't forgotten it, anyway, in this awful darkness that had followed. That would be the most terrible thing of all, if she began to forget. Then her heart would have to close.

Yes, but if she kept it open, to feel the happiness, then she would have to feel the rest, too. . . . She would have to feel again, like blows on her open heart, every cruel detail of Harold's suffering, and the awful blank fact of his death.

It couldn't be. That terrible struggling unbelief had to come all over her again. Something like that couldn't happen to them, to Harold and Elizabeth—not to *her*, to Elizabeth, whose life was always ringed about in a kind of sanctity of fortune. It couldn't be over so soon. Harold couldn't have died. It couldn't be true that she was here at home, submerged in the hot leafiness of mid-summer, with nothing of that whole wonderful spring but a few memories.

Lying drearily on her bed, she thought of her grandmother when she had lived in the big bedroom downstairs. Grandma used not to hear when Charles and Elizabeth spoke to her. Day after day, she used to sit there with nothing but her thoughts. Why was grandma so funny?—Charles and Elizabeth used

to ask. Elizabeth understood it now. . . . Oh, but how could grandma have endured it to live on, after nearly every one she cared for was gone? How could anybody endure things?

They would hurt too much. Now it even hurt her to see the roses fall. She couldn't bear to look at the rose-bush in front of the house because she knew how all the yellow petals were going to lie scattered. She didn't even want mother to plant her fall flowers. She had seen things happen before, but she had been outside of them. It was that first morning after she and Harold had been together—it was then that she had come awake in her room at Mrs. Grover's to feel her heart wide open like the apple-blossoms outside the window. When she had walked to the schoolhouse with the other teachers, stopping to make little runs into yards as they passed to smell the fruit blossoms—"E-liz-abeth!" the girls were scandalized—she had felt as if she were suddenly a part of the whole blossoming world. In the schoolhouse all the windows were open and warm air was blowing through. On her shiny desk she had found a big bunch of tulips that an adoring child had brought her . . . and she remembered how, crowding them all lightly into her hands, she had looked deep down into the very centers where yellow pollen had shaken and powdered the bloom. . . .

Elizabeth got slowly off the bed. She sat on the floor beside the window and looked out into the heavy green of the leaves across the street.

A big brown dog came loping along. He stopped and sniffed at some paper on the street. A man came past, and the dog stopped, quivered, and gave a clumsy jump and a hopeful, eager, pitiful yelp. Elizabeth shrank back from the window. She knew that the dog was a stray. She knew how the man had given him a quick push down, without looking, and gone

straight on. She knew . . . and yet she didn't take him. She crouched down and put her hands over her eyes. When she looked again, he was gone.

Now she almost wished that she had gone with mother and dad. She couldn't tell them why it was she hated to go anywhere. But it was not merely because she was "brooding." She had consented to go just once to a party. Mother said that if she didn't the girls would think it was because she had gone away to college. But she suffered so terribly all through the chatter that she thought she would have to say she was sick and come home. She felt as if Veronica Porter's birthmark were printed on her own cheek. She understood the nervous, high-keyed laughter of girls who were beginning to be afraid; and she knew what lay under Mae Garner's subtle, secret smile. When mother had entertained the Aid, it was just the same. Elizabeth passed the napkins and the cream and sugar; and then she had to run upstairs to hide from the marred faces of all those women . . . old Mrs. Kaster in from the country with her furtive glance of a dark little slave; big fat Mrs. Hittenmiller with her worn hands spread on her billowing stomach; thin little white-haired Mrs. Ritchie with the starved brilliant eyes that gave away her life with that awful Mr. Ritchie. . . .

There was a knock at the back door.

"You folks want any melons?"

"No. . . . Yes, I'll take one," Elizabeth said hastily.

She was ashamed as she hurried back upstairs for her pocket-book. Dad had bought some melons, and she knew these didn't look very good. But she couldn't stand the sight of that tottering old man with the two or three loose tusks in his open dribbling mouth rimmed around with old white stubble—not unless she at least took one of his melons. She shuddered. People could

actually get to be that way. She saw him go out to his wagon. The heavy trees and the rich green lawn beyond the kitchen door seemed darkened to hold all the old things dying and sinking into them.

Elizabeth was afraid to look out of the window. She might see something like that dog again. Her Hardy book was lying face down on the dresser. But she was even afraid to read. It was as if she entered now into the very center of the long, difficult, solemn phrases and couldn't get away from the irresistible, inevitable wear of their bitter truth.

But she couldn't sit here, either. She got up restlessly, washed, powdered, and went out of the house.

She went hastily down the front walk to get away from the sight of the house behind her. The broken laths in the lattice below the porch, the spreading look of the yellow rose-bushes that grandma had planted, the open door of the garage that used to be the old barn, made her realize how, slowly, the stability of the household was crumbling. Last winter dad and mother had been alone.

She looked with a kind of horror at all the houses. An old couple lived in this place that she was passing. She had seen them, on these summer evenings, sitting together on the narrow, sunken porch closed in with vines and plants that had an earthy odor. Soon, one or the other would be dead. Then the one left behind would live alone for a little while. There was a crippled man in this white house. Elizabeth was used to seeing him from the time she was a child, but she hadn't thought to ask dad or mother how it had happened. Now it was as if she could feel the distant shock of the sudden accident long ago and then the slow, maimed years and years of creeping through

the richness of life and taking, a little here, a little there, whatever was left to him. . . .

She stopped. All at once she felt herself standing in the midst of the whole town. She felt it all around her . . . the streets under the summer trees where cars flashed out of the drive-ways of the bright new houses where life was all happening now, flowers in bloom, and children's playthings scattered on the walks—and coming slowly after, an old horse patiently jogging to the end of its days; the business section where the stores lasted a while and then changed hands; the aging houses on the edge of town before you came to the cemetery dark with evergreens; fields and woods all about it blooming and fading with the seasons; and the little river that moved slowly to join a bigger river flowing slowly to the Gulf, that finally met and merged with the sea.

What could people do? She could close her eyes and harden herself. Then she would forget—as mother told her—and after a while begin again. But if she really forgot, she would have to deny all the knowledge that opened up the depth of existence . . . and if she kept that, if she remembered, how could she wholly trust herself again? To stop feeling made everything useless. And yet, to see and feel like this would be annihilation. . . . She was being torn apart and scattered through all the pain there was. . . .

She turned blindly and escaped into a side street that ended in a pasture where a few big oak trees stood. There was a sense of staidness about the few white houses with old-fashioned flowers. The lawns were watered, perennials were planted, and the houses, when they faded, were painted the same white again.

This was the street where Miss Gurney lived. Elizabeth saw

the plain white house with a sense of relief. She remembered how, when she was a little girl, and felt lonely—when she had quarreled with her chum, or got a poor mark in arithmetic—she used to go for consolation to see Miss Gurney.

She couldn't talk to mother. Mother cared for her too much. It hurt mother so to see her child unhappy that she would lie about the way the world was, and in the end could only plead, "Don't cry!" People who had never known were of no use, and she couldn't bear to look at those who had known too much. Miss Gurney's house held the only refuge.

Elizabeth moved through a neat pattern of shade to the clean white steps. The tinkle of the bell, faint but clear, marked time for a moment; and the quiet freshness of the lawn kept the shade and sunlight still.

There was a reassuring sense of custom in having Miss Gurney, just as always, open the door, and say in a tone pleased and yet not surprised:

"Why, Elizabeth!"

She liked to have her add, too:

"I'll have to take you into the kitchen. Do you mind? I'm baking a cake for the supper the ladies are giving."

"Oh, no. I always liked to be in your kitchen."

She could take a faint sense of melancholy pleasure in sitting down in the low, cane-seated chair where she always used to sit, and in looking around and seeing that the room looked just the same. There were six glasses of dark red jelly on the window-sill. It was even quieter than it used to be. Miss Gurney, large and fresh in her black and white apron, with her strong face framed in iron-gray hair, was briskly creaming the butter and sugar.

"Well, Elizabeth," she said, "I haven't seen you for a good

while. What have you been doing with yourself this summer?"

"Oh . . . nothing much."

Elizabeth herself flushed faintly at the concealing reticence of her tone. She had come wanting to talk to Miss Gurney; but there was something in this atmosphere of cheerful, sustained quiet, within which Miss Gurney's brisk activities were going on, that she dared not break. The white sash curtains shut her in with her untouched childhood; and she could only hear the dwindling rattle of a wagon outside in the street.

"Well," Miss Gurney said, "I expect you've been busy like the rest of us."

She did not know whether she was hurt or reassured by the friendly, acceptant lack of comprehension. No one but mother and dad knew what had happened to her. Even they didn't really know. There was a terrible shame in suffering, as if one were picked out from all the world. But she felt, as always, a consolation when she saw Miss Gurney's strong arms at work. People sent for Miss Gurney when something was wrong. She was kind and helpful, but she was brisk and cool; as if there were something in her not concerned; as if—Elizabeth thought, and the thought was like a cold breath coming over her—she could help other people with everything, because she had never started living for herself.

"Here, Elizabeth, you're pretty good at beating eggs, aren't you? Seems to me I remember you are."

"I'll try."

Elizabeth got up. The temporary relief of the small, brisk action helped her to mark time a little while longer with ordinary talk.

"What kind of cake is it going to be?"

"The regulation old kind. Chocolate frosting."

"Do they always make you bake cakes?"

"Always."

Elizabeth laughed. She clung to any intimation of the refuge of continuity.

"Yes, Elizabeth, if all the cakes I've baked for suppers in this town were put end to end, they'd reach into California and the frosting melt in the Pacific ocean. Wish they'd take me out there," Miss Gurney said.

"Do you really want to go?"

"Well, I've always had kind of a hankering to see it."

"I don't want you to," Elizabeth said, in a low, quick tone.

"Don't want me to?"

"No. I always want you to be in this house."

Miss Gurney flushed with pleasure that had a queer touch of girlish shyness. She laughed. But she said a little ruefully, as she opened the oven door and tested the heat:

"It's where I'm likely to be, I guess, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth surrendered her bowl of beaten eggs. Now, as she looked about the kitchen while she stood waiting, she saw even that in a different light. Yes, they were the same things, but it was as if she couldn't keep herself from realizing now where the things had come from. The low rocking chair had been Miss Gurney's mother's. The clock with the octagonal face must have belonged to the old housekeeping days. A brown coat, that had been Miss Gurney's father's, hung on a nail beside the door. The evidences of the life of the household stood out now like visible marks and were not going to let her escape their significance.

"How are your father and mother?" Miss Gurney asked.

"All right, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Well, all right as far as I know."

"What's the matter with 'em?"

"Nothing." Elizabeth looked down. She wanted to keep her voice from shaking. "Only they look older to me this summer. I never noticed it before."

"Well, Elizabeth, we all have to get older."

Elizabeth looked up in quick protest. She rebelled against, and yet envied, the cheerful acceptance of the tone. Was there nothing to do but accept and act cheerful?—she wanted to ask. Were you helpless under what life did to you?

Miss Gurney said suddenly:

"You knew father was gone?"

"No!"

"Yes, he died last winter."

Elizabeth, startled, realized that there was a different quietness in the house. Then this was what it meant! There were no little grunting moans and shifting sounds from the bedroom where for years old Mr. Gurney, injured by a fall, had sat in his big rocker beside the window. Indeed, it seemed to Elizabeth that he had always sat there.

"Yes," Miss Gurney repeated soberly, "father died last winter, sitting in his chair, just fifteen years to the day since mother passed away. It doesn't seem as if they could both be gone."

And then more cheerfully, with recovered briskness, she added:

"Well, I miss him. But it's better. It was ten years since he was hurt."

"Only that long?" Elizabeth breathed.

"Isn't that long enough, child?"

"I mean . . . I can't seem to remember him any other way."

And Elizabeth sat, quiescent but resentful, under what she knew was coming, must be coming, words that would break forever the illusion of peace in this old white house and spoil even the refuge of this kitchen.

"I suppose not," Miss Gurney agreed. "But it was very different before that. Father was a very active man. He was old, but he chopped his own wood, and drove the team . . . you don't remember that?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Yes," Miss Gurney mused, "he sat in that chair for ten years. He was ninety-one when he died."

The words, the time, year by year, sank into Elizabeth. In the midst of these years, the little moans and sounds she used to hear from that shadowed bedroom—meaningless then—took on a significance of protesting pain all the more terrible because it was barely articulate.

"How did it happen?"

Miss Gurney said, "Well, he was getting into the wagon. I suppose he was stiff with cold. He'd been working around the place. Anyway, he slipped, and the wheels went over his body. Broke both legs. He was too old for them to mend. He never could get around again."

Yes, Elizabeth realized now that the faint sense of difference in the house, troubling her even while she held it off, was just the deepening of its quiet. And there was something like pain, only wider and bleaker, in the quiet itself—something that seemed to be an echo to their voices, to Miss Gurney's matter-of-fact voice as she went on.

"Yes, he was helpless ten years, and mother before that. You don't remember my mother, Elizabeth. She died when you were a little girl. But it was a queer thing—yes, sir, I've often thought

of that—that mother should have been crippled by an accident, too. She was picking some apples, and either the branch broke with her, or the stepladder slipped out from under her feet—anyway, she was crippled for the rest of her life. It was a pretty hard ending for folks that had been so active and worked so hard.”

Elizabeth said:

“Did you take care of them both, Miss Gurney?”

“I was the only one to do it, Elizabeth.”

Miss Gurney broke off what might have been a sigh, perhaps only a breath, to open the oven door. Elizabeth sat staring at her. Then even this quiet household was not set apart! It had to take its place with the others, all changing, within the loop of the moving river! It was quiet . . . but what help was there in a quietness that was only what was left over when the worst was done? She was going to ask Miss Gurney if she minded being there alone.

But looking at that strong face, with the eyes averted and the lips compressed, she suddenly knew the answer too keenly to hear it. She saw that active, cheerful life within the silent house as a diminishing, perhaps unconscious waiting for what had never come, and now never would. And yet Miss Gurney could *do* things. All at once, the words that she had come here to speak rose uncontrollably to Elizabeth’s lips.

“Miss Gurney—when things happen to people, how can they stand to go on living? Why don’t they simply die?”

She waited not daring to breathe.

Miss Gurney said, after a moment, poking at her cake with a broom straw, “Well, Elizabeth, I guess they just have to learn to take things as they come.”

“Yes, but then . . . *how* do they? I don’t see how.”

Miss Gurney gave an abrupt laugh, although her face was sober.

"Well, they just learn to, I guess. Because they have to."

In the lonely quiet of that house—a faint crackle of fire in the stove, a rustle of leaves outside—Elizabeth seemed to feel, at a far distance, her own suffering sinking slowly into the darkness of trees and ground that had held everything before it.

But was that all the answer? She stared at Miss Gurney with eyes wide open and dark with pain in her young, quivering face. A remoteness came over the strong, averted face of the older woman. It was as if she dared not meet the living pain in Elizabeth's eyes with its absence in her own. Elizabeth saw that look. Then the answer was worse than none! She would not have it. And she squeezed her hands tightly together, clinging to her suffering . . . as if, when its freshness was gone, it would be the one thing lost forever.