
AUNTIE BISSEL

WHEN I WAS OUT IN CALIFORNIA I HAD A LETTER FROM ONE OF my mother's old friends telling me: "You must look up Auntie Bissel."

That was the first I had heard that Auntie Bissel had become a Californian. In fact, I hadn't heard anything of Auntie Bissel for years, not since word had come of Uncle Harvey's death. It was so impossible to think of one of them without the other, that I believe I must have taken it for granted that when Uncle Harvey had died Auntie Bissel had just stopped living too.

And I believe that I now felt a little resentful to find she hadn't! For me, as for so many nomadic Americans, there was a small town

that lived on in my memory, beloved not because it was lovely, but because—although it was itself a beginning—I looked back upon it as complete. Now, with Auntie Bissel and Uncle Harvey gone, there was no longer any Riverton.

Not that the Bissels were the leading citizens! Those were the Robinsons, the Boardmans, and the Days, the New England families who were the early settlers. It was probably only we children who naïvely accepted Auntie Bissel and Uncle Harvey as chief characters of the town. Still, we were not so very far wrong. For the Bissels, of mixed, somewhat miscellaneous, origin—and far more than Mrs. Robinson with her meticulous speech, than Mr. Day with his bleak banker's face—had that strong, that almost rank quality of the characteristic which gave the little town itself its essential claim upon memory. Uncle Harvey—he had a rosy Santa Claus face, a little mustache that we children used to tug, saying, "Ding, ding, two fares!"—was the station agent. They had a house of the regulation kind, with an L. Church suppers, lodges—both of them were deep in the folk activities of the town.

The house! Regulation, I called it. But that is far too mild a term for the rich aura of the commonplace brought to a climax in its interior. A recital of Auntie Bissel's tastes would read like a catalogue of the period. It is needless to say that nothing went unadorned: that the piano top draped askew was loaded with photographs set on miniature fancy easels—babies predominating, and naked preferred—that the chamber pots nestled in pink tasseled covers; that big red roses were embroidered on brown crash cushions; and noble heads of Indian maidens were framed in burned wood tinted in reds and greens. The whole house was thick with curtains and jingly portieres. And among these, the pug dog of that era, smelly as well as snorty, led its over-stuffed life, yelping if disturbed at its slumbers. Riverton should have kept the house as a museum in which all the bad taste of that flourishing period was enshrined in convincing unself-consciousness, to produce what Auntie Bissel called "a homey atmosphere."

But it was immaculate. The house smelled of fresh biscuits—yes, even more than of dog. Fresh biscuits with the rich butter melting in little golden runlets—chocolate cakes, golden-brown fried chicken, perfect coffee—these delicious things were as characteristic of Auntie Bissel's as the mass of little rugs always getting in the way when one tried to shut a door.

Need I add that children flocked there—drawn by the biscuits, the candy Uncle Harvey kept in crumpled striped paper sacks? Auntie Bissel curled our hair, tied sashes around our waists and gave us fans. She doused our sailor collars with perfume—we always came away from Auntie Bissel's overfed and stepping high and sniffing our reeking carnation aroma in an ecstasy of self-appreciation.

Auntie Bissel, like Mrs. Judge Robinson, had "lost a little girl." That awesome phrase made us afraid to go to Mrs. Robinson's. But we never thought of being afraid of Auntie Bissel's Gracie. She was as real to us as our own little friends, and almost as much alive. We named dolls Gracie. We stared with admiration at her picture, the eyes tinted blue and the cheeks shell pink, set under a bubble of glass in a golden frame that culminated in the most beautiful of curlicues. We wanted to know just what kind of cloth her little blue dress was made of, and had a feeling of the most ineffable softness when told that it was "albatross." When we asked where Gracie was now Auntie Bissel replied that she "had fallen asleep." There was a stricken look in Uncle Harvey's eyes. On Decoration Day, we could see with awe that he had been crying. But Auntie Bissel was at the Armory then, wrapping the stems of great wet snowballs in crackly tinfoil. Her pale blue eyes were overflowing, but she was the busiest worker there—"in her element," people would say, "she's just in her element"—getting a kind of dramatic enjoyment even from the sad memory of having lost a loved one.

No doubt it was after Gracie's death that both of them assumed their community titles of Uncle and Auntie. But we children never heard them refer to each other by any other terms. "You go out and

see what Auntie Bissel's got in the kitchen," Uncle Harvey would say. And Auntie Bissel would say, "You little girlies run and tell Uncle Harvey Auntie says it's time for him to come wash his hands." It was not only to us children, though, that Auntie Bissel and Uncle Harvey were so integral a part of that early-century Riverton, the town couldn't have been imagined without them. Auntie Bissel wasn't the simple stalwart Pioneer Woman in the sunbonnet to whom statues are raised and of whom legends are made. Both statue and legend for her would have been far more rococo! But in the Riverton of the early nineteen hundreds, among the cushions and the souvenirs, she fulfilled her part. Auntie Bissel went into the sickrooms of obstreperous men and scolded them for being too priggish to submit to nursing. "Now look here, I've got you flat on your back, and I'm going to make you mind even if wifie can't." She rubbed rheumatic limbs, gave enemas with great enjoyment, coddled the ancient. She prepared a little silk dress with lace trimming for the dead child of the colored washerwoman—that was the only colored family in Riverton—and shared the consolation the family drew from their pride. It was a common saying in Riverton:

"How could this town get along without the Bissels!"

So I think I may be allowed a touch of rueful disappointment to find that Auntie Bissel was still living and yet not there.

The memory of the house with the L was so close around me that I couldn't believe in this semi-Spanish house with its blue door, an imposing house in the southern California manner. I rang the bell with misgivings.

It wasn't Auntie Bissel who came. It was a rather tall lady, gray haired, refined, to whom the semitropical setting seemed not very much more appropriate than to Auntie Bissel herself. She said yes, she would call "Mrs. Bissel," and gave me a smile that left me with an impression of the brave, humble fortitude of a spinster.

I was left to wait in the living room. Auntie Bissel's living room!

—this spacious Californian place, with the arched front window giving dramatically, between parted blue curtains, a view of palm trees looking gray and prehistoric in the fog. I could see almost nothing to suggest the old homey atmosphere—not, that is, until I heard a snort, a thump, and a very ugly, overfed Boston terrier came running to me on bow legs and thrust up its head with pleading dark eyes goggling at me. I was engaged with its vociferous calls for attention when Auntie Bissel came into the room.

At first my mouth went open in a gasp. She was more than ever plump—"fleshy" was her word—and she had bloomed in keeping with her new fortunes, whatever they might be. I had seen that phenomenon in other elderly ladies transplanted to a place beneath this magic sun. But Auntie Bissel! "A very heavy head of hair" had been her pride, and the great coil known as Auntie Bissel's topknot had seemed as much of a landmark in Riverton as the water tower. Now the hair was bobbed, bobbed and grandly frizzled, and no slogan of "dignity for the older woman" had interfered with Auntie Bissel's new coiffure. The ends glistened in bright gold, but the top had dwindled back to silver ("to keep company with Alice," I was later informed—Alice was an old stickler). She came forward in considerable clatter of bracelets and beads, a fine new color on her cheeks, a welcoming smile on her poppy-red lips. But with the lavish clasp of her fat arms, all was again familiar, I knew her through the poppy and the gold. I forgave her for having survived Uncle Harvey, for disrupting my memory of Riverton, and felt a moisture mildly responding to the easy overflowing of tears in those blue eyes protuberant with good living.

"My, my, my! When Alice told me I had a lady visitor, I never supposed—! I'll have to have another squeeze. One of my own little girlies and all grown up!" She wiped her eyes. "I expect you find me pretty changed too."

"Well—a little."

"I suppose Tillie gave you a real welcome. Her's a great little welcomer, so her is."

Tillie the Toiler was the dog's name—just the kind of dog that forms the model for that litter of "garden ornaments" on the lawns of houses marked TOURIST in full accordance with Auntie Bissel's taste; and I was amused and pleased to hear Auntie Bissel, as she offered her face with relish for an overjoyed licking, term herself the little doggum's not Mama, but Auntie. I was going to speak of the pug in Riverton—how, like all pugs, she seemed to have been modernized into a Boston terrier. But I was afraid of bringing up the subject of the old home, of Uncle Harvey, of all she had lost.

Auntie Bissel wasn't afraid. She began to talk in a flood.

"I want to hear all about you. And where's that hubby of yours? I want to see him."

She would see him. He was going to stop for me. No sooner said than Auntie Bissel had it settled that—no matter what the size of the Sunday dinner we had enjoyed—we were both to stay for "a little pickup lunch."

But she was forgetting that she had a cake in the oven! (I had been aware of a good smell from somewhere mingling with the ancient flatness of the ocean fog.) She was going to take me right out with her. She guessed I had been in her kitchen before.

I had been in Auntie Bissel's kitchen, but not in this one! It was as gleamingly up-to-date in porcelain and curtains appliqued with bright oranges as the picture of a model room from a household magazine.

"What do you think of my little kitchen?" Auntie Bissel asked with naïve contentment. "The old gentleman, bless his heart, let me fix it up just exactly as I pleased. It's the kind I'd always set my heart on having someday."

Just as some might have thought of Auntie Bissel's old house as a home of tragedy, after the loss of Gracie, so they might have looked upon her now as a lonely old woman bereft of all. But not if they had seen her in this kitchen!—seen her heated and bustling, calling my attention happily to all its new gadgets and devices, with the smell of

chocolate cake which finally came luscious out of the beautiful enameled oven.

"The little girlie next door is having a birthday, so I said I'd see to it she had a cake. The mama's busy, you know—and they've lived around a good deal. Well, I'm still at my old tricks," Auntie Bissel finished with happy complacency.

I still didn't know just how she had come here. Or who "the old gentleman" was. Or the lady who had given me the smile. Uncle Harvey's modest little estate could scarcely have provided this house. Auntie Bissel was at first too busy to explain, although she kept making breathless promises and references. Oh, she had so much to tell me! She couldn't begin to get it told today. She got sidetracked from her own history, however, and launched with adoring relish upon the story of the children for whom she was making the cake. This dear little tot who was having the birthday was just the cutest little piece you ever saw! Her folks were out here trying to get her into the movies. And my, when she did get in, she'd back some of these grown-up stars right off the screen! "Oh, I just do think kiddies are so cunnin' in pictures. These are all show children—the whole little bunch. And are they smart!" Now, although I wanted to hear about Auntie herself, I sat contented with the old busy sense of things going on—warily licking a spoonful of frosting, for I knew what the pickup lunch would be. As I looked at Auntie Bissel, shining with a contented effulgence, her cheeks now flushed purple under the bright stationary pink, it seemed to me that she was really more in her element than she had ever been!

When the cake was frosted and put to cool, and we were back in the living room, Auntie Bissel did launch herself upon her personal history. And although it was interspersed with, almost motivated by, deaths—at the mention of each of which her eyes overflowed—I could see that she took the same dramatic consolation in them as in the memory of her early great loss. I don't know that Auntie Bissel's faith was deeper than that of others. In fact, I am sure it wasn't. She went to

church, but she was more of a goer than a believer. Yet the phrase "passed on" seemed now to render her a mystic consolation, like the old one of "fallen asleep."

"Of course you knew when Uncle Harvey passed on. I remember the lovely letter you folks wrote me. I just didn't know what ever I was going to do! But right then came word that my brother's wife had passed on too, and that he wanted me to come out here and look after them all. It really was queer how it happened. I'd always been hoping to make the trip to California, and this came just at the right time. The only thing was that Uncle Harvey didn't get to come. We'd always looked forward to the trip someday. But then, you can't have everything right."

She had kept house for her brother for a while, until he had taken it into his head to marry again. "But men need to be married. They can't get along." And then there was this old gentleman whose wife had passed away—it was "away" for the wife, no "on"!—and he needed someone to look after him and his house. "So just when I needed it, the right thing turned up again! I said when Uncle Harvey was taken, and things looked pretty black, that what all of us need is trust that everything's coming out all right. It's the way we think about things, that's what's important." Of course, in some ways it had been hard. The children, Auntie Bissel said mysteriously, had made trouble. "But I knew the old gentleman needed me, and what had they ever done for him, and I wasn't going to step out for them no matter what awful things they tried to spread around. As if that poor old gentleman!—well, anyway"—Auntie Bissel wiped her eyes—"when he passed on, there was an awful fuss. But they couldn't prove he wasn't in his right mind—righter than any of them had ever been!" There was a look of ease about Auntie Bissel now, like one who is provided for. That was the only phrase she would use. "Provided for." But I was to infer that the old gentleman had left her the house. And then, when it looked as if she was going to be lonesome, all by herself in this big place, Alice's mother had passed on—"And I believe the poor girl would have given

up herself if I hadn't made her come in with me." Alice—she was the lady who had let me in—was not, as I had thought she might be, one of the Day girls from Riverton now appropriately "making her home" with Auntie Bissel. No, she was from Ohio, and had been a librarian, but the mother's health had failed, and they had come out here. But Auntie Bissel couldn't have loved her more if she had been her own daughter. In some ways, it seemed as if Alice was just what Gracie might have been.

"It all goes to show you never can tell, can you?" Auntie Bissel said with her air of discovery. "You just have to trust. So now I have this lovely place, and my little kitchen, everything just the way I want it, and all the wonderful things around me—and Alice to keep me from getting lonesome—yes and Tillie. Auntie won't go forgetting her."

There was a clamor at the doorbell.

"Oh, my little sweetheartums has come after her birfday cake! Auntie Bissel's got it all ready. All ready and waiting, and now come in and show the nice lady what a sweet little bunch of kiddies Auntie Bissel has now. This lady used to be one of Auntie Bissel's little girlies. Think of that!" They didn't seem to think much. "Just the same as this little honey bun is now."

Oh, no, not the same! That could be only politeness on Auntie Bissel's part. If the kitchen, crammed with the latest do-dads, rejoiced Auntie Bissel's soul, these children were the perfect embodiment of the ideal she was feebly trying for with the means at hand when she used to comb out and curl the braided hair of the little girls in Riverton and send them home reeking with perfumery. Auntie Bissel introduced the children with gloating pride.

"Now, isn't this a cunnin' bunch? Did you ever see such a head of curls in your life? And you don't know how smart they are! They can dance, and sing, and all kinds of things. Pretty soon they're going to show us. Aren't they?"

But no one could have missed the fact that these were "show children." Already they were well broken in to performance. They had the

peculiarly large blob faces, the redundancy of fat cheeks and dimples and curls, the bold, too-knowing gaze of a flock of movie comedy tots. Every trait known as "childish" was developed and displayed to the uttermost, until childishness itself was lost. They were the personification of the idea (if it can be called such) behind the creation of those overblown pink celluloid dolls which Auntie Bissel loved to suspend above dresser tops by green ribbons.

But "the little girl who was having the birthday" held center. Auntie Bissel hugged her in proud delight. Here was the doll in life. If she had been a doll, dressed and manufactured to Auntie Bissel's order, she couldn't have fitted the role so well. Everything answered the dream—the ruffled dress showing the dimpled arms; the pink ribbon around the curls; the fat face; the dear little shiny slippers; the cute bold stare ("she wasn't afraid of strangers, no siree, not afraid of anything"). Auntie Bissel showed off all these points with doting pride, taking special delight in the "birfday gift" coolly displayed, a real little grown-up lady's compact.

"Let Auntie and the lady see. Oh, isn't that just too lovely! Little powder, and puffie, and rouge, and lipstick, just like a grown-up movie star! Shall Auntie put some on her? Now show the kiddies. Show the lady. Doesn't she look beautiful?"

The child whirled and pouted at me with her bright red Cupid's bow. My heart sank as I realized that here stood the fulfillment of Auntie Bissel's fondest dream—a sublimation, in truth—as even Gracie could never have fulfilled it. (But the easy mist had gathered in her eyes, meaning "this is just the way Gracie would have looked.") Never had I felt the goofy Santa Claus dream quality of this West Coast heaven conjured up for Auntie Bissel and her kind as at this moment, gazing upon Auntie Bissel's sublimation! The children had attained a gaudier bloom than Auntie herself. Even the smallest of them was overblown. In the famous words of the picture magnate they were all "colossal—in a small way."

But now they must do their stuff. They snapped into their acts

with blasé speed and put them through with alert, adult timing. The little birthday girl came first. Holding out her ruffles, she postured and pointed at her audience in silver-screen glee. I could see her reuniting the parted movie parents in the grand embrace of the final reel. I could see her piteous weeping because her mommie had gone to heaven. But now the lady would like to hear some singing, wouldn't she? A boy with long locks combed back from a broad Jackie Coogan countenance was not at all backward about favoring the lady. Striking an easy man-of-the-world posture, and fixing upon me a deliberately melting eye, he left no doubt that he was singing straight to my heart. I listened with the horrid conviction that here before me stood that incredible child who brightly answered the nightly questions about the virtues of a laxative in response to the melodiously cultivated voice of a gentleman on the radio—whom I had been regarding, and still did, as the most obnoxious infant on the earth.

And yet over the whole small vulgar display there hovered something pathetic, disarming—how can I name it? All was glowing in the happy light of Auntie Bissel's pure naïveté. The children snapped out of their act as smoothly as they had gone into it. Their departure with the cake was appropriately boisterous. The broad face of the radio youth became suddenly boyish with wholesome greed. Auntie Bissel beamed with gratification. And she was Auntie Bissel still.

Now that hubby of mine did come, and he had to stay. But I knew that Auntie Bissel's pickup lunch would be reward enough. In the meal itself there was a kind of sublimation. Here were the fruits of the earth, all bigger and better, and roses from her own garden in February. Tillie sat in turn at all our feet with eyes goggling. (I could see from Alice's sweet, pained smile that for Auntie Bissel's sake she forebore to draw away her ladylike skirts.) My husband nearly foun-dered trying to live up to Auntie Bissel's idea of a man's appetite. Her eyes were moist as she repeated happily how good it was to have a man at the table again!

But now that Auntie Bissel had found me, she wasn't going to

lose me again. I hadn't begun to see anything! Before we left, I had promised to make a real visit. I found later that I was looking forward to it in a particular way—as if it might let me into occult social mysteries, like peeking into the old lodge room and seeing Auntie Bissel dressed up in her secret regalia.

When my husband took a trip with pack horses, I came to stay at Auntie Bissel's.

This was Auntie Bissel's now. The room I was given had evidently belonged to the old gentleman's regime, like the living room; but as soon as I had taken off my wraps, Auntie Bissel begged me to come into her own little nest, where we could be so much more comfy. Here the earlier dignity had become charged with Auntie Bissel's homey atmosphere. Cushions were three deep, there were dolls, pictures cut from magazines, curtains tied back with perky bows, an art-department bedspread. Although the things were new, I recognized them as the logical modern substitutes for the old Riverton souvenirs, just as Tillie had logically supplanted the pug. There was only one thing that was really familiar.

"You remember this," Auntie Bissel said.

She pointed to the wall above her bed, where the picture of Gracie, now faded and dimmed, hung in its tarnished golden frame beneath the heavy bubble of glass. In her blue albatross, with her innocent eyes beneath home-cut bangs, Gracie seemed like some little, forgotten ancestress, rather than Auntie Bissel's own child.

With solemnity, her eyes overflowing, Auntie Bissel brought me Uncle Harvey's last photograph. The hair was silvered, the little mustache was gone, but his smile was still there, willing if faint—and now I could see truly that deeply stricken look in his kindly eyes. But as always with Auntie Bissel herself, the sense of survival was stronger than the sense of loss.

When Alice came home, the time had flown so, it had to be another pickup lunch. Auntie Bissel said that she and Alice and I were

going to have just the best old time! That was what she loved here—always something to see, somewhere to go—a person could be on the go every minute! Wouldn't Uncle Harvey have loved it? Of that I wasn't so sure. I thought Uncle Harvey had loved the depot, keeping track of the trains by name—the Morning Mail, the Flyer, the Way-Freight—talking with conductors and brakemen on cold winter days when they came into the station to get warmed up, joking with children when he made out half-fare tickets and pretending they were cheating and were really grown folks. But Auntie Bissel had found her place, no doubt of that.

I felt it more and more, as she showed me "everything"! In the garden, it was the size of the flowers that she loved more than the flowers themselves. The fact that they were blooming when they shouldn't have been blooming was ever new to her childlike wonder. It answered her combined belief and disbelief in miracles. Even the goldfish in the little pool, like all members of the animal kingdom cherished by Auntie Bissel, looked heartily overstuffed. But the live goldfish, the lovebirds in their colored cage, Tillie running bowlegged and butting down the paths, these were not enough—no, Auntie Bissel must set up besides, to fill her garden, sticks bearing birds' heads, artificial toads, one of these dreadful Tillie models, wearing a red bow, and glaring at a spitting, red-bowed cat.

The bathroom!—if that wasn't typically Auntie Bissel's!—the full-blown outcome of the old commode with the flowered chamber set, the pink-tasseled husher, the marbled soap. But in the midst of the mitts and mats and brushes, the soap in the form of ducks and dolls, I had to smile at the chaste, modest reticence of Alice's two plain immaculate towels and her one small bar of pure castile soap.

I wondered at first about this union of Auntie Bissel and Alice. Alice was spare, although not thin. She had the peculiar, almost codfish paleness of the less vital type of New Englander. I could see, by her deprecating smile at Auntie Bissel's raptures, that Alice felt herself "cultured" in much the same way as the Robinson girls. She subscribed

to a book club, hung a print of the Sistine Madonna above her bed, went to lectures and travel talks, and cherished the pictures of her pioneer great-grandparents in small dark walnut frames. But Alice explained to me—in her cool, maidenly bower, where she had taken me for confidence—that Auntie Bissel was “so good.” Auntie Bissel by now, and by bits—as she stirred things on the stove, or pressed a dress for Alice (her morning greeting always was, “Now if you girlies have any pressing bring it out—and if you have any little things to wash out, I can just as well do it for you while my hands are in water”)—had related a considerable part of Alice’s history. I could well see that Alice did, as Auntie Bissel said, want petting. It was she who had given it before, since her mother, and not she, had been a mother—that seemed the reasoning. Since Alice’s dear little mother was a mother, and Alice only a daughter, Alice was always to be a daughter, and never a mother—and since she wasn’t a mother, and so couldn’t “know,” she must forever make up to her poor little mother for being the mother and she the daughter. I expect that Alice too, since she was living with Auntie Bissel, had come into some belated filial paradise of which she hadn’t even dared have dreams. Alice was so thoroughly a New Englander become Middle Westerner, and yet a Californian as well—pale but living, as if the blood running thin had been replenished by a kind of elixir, colorless and flat as water, curiously active, and curiously insipid—like the air of the Pacific beaches, so strangely drained of the heavy sea-smells of the Atlantic coast.

I came to realize, on this visit, that Alice and Auntie Bissel, leaving what might be called their respective Rivertons and coming to the land of eternal sunshine, both had reached the last stand of their tribe and race. They had come into its final flowering, whether real or unreal none could say. Everything seemed to have some quality of a fantastic yet concrete dream. Auntie Bissel took me to a famous theater, to see, made immortal in cement, the fabulously tiny “footprints of the stars”—and these stars themselves were all that Auntie Bissel had ever dreamed womankind could be. She saw Gracie in every synthetic golden

head. I remembered how Auntie Bissel had always loved to "go to the show." And here was the show reduced to terms of ordinary living raised to terms of the show! The orange juice stands that were huge oranges, the lemonade stands that were lemons—all was pictured out and made concrete for her delighted naïveté. This was her coast of Bohemia, where, if she chose, she could be on the go all day long. And all of it had that curiously unreal and fabulous quality—sometimes it was truly as if we were walking on air. These roses that had been conjured from the desert might have vanished under one light tap from some monstrous wand. There was a sense of trembling transiency in the fairyland glimmer of the evening lights beyond Auntie Bissel's theatrical front window. Here she dwelt in ingenuous delight, she and her tribe—in the midst of marvels so lately created, so complacently accepted—and those who had owned the desert before this fairy tale began were "foreigners." Auntie Bissel had all the scareheads—the Reds, the Foreigners, the Yellow Peril, all who seemed to threaten the complacent blandness of her paradise. Yet she had a feeling of magic security in the midst of this transiency that came to seem to me the most fabulous thing of all.

"Oh, this is such a lovely story!" Auntie Bissel would voluptuously sigh over those continued stories she used to save for "shut-ins." "The author just had me wondering for a while, so many things happened, but in the end it all came out all right."

All things worked to convince me that Auntie Bissel herself was dwelling in her own happy ending, regarding it with contented wonder as both a natural consequence and a miracle. For in spite of missing Uncle Harvey, of wanting a man at the table—as she told me day by day—Auntie Bissel now found herself in her ideal situation. Auntie Bissel was a Riverton Worthy Matron. No need to convince me that the children of the old gentleman were wrong in those dreadful things they said! It was not for the allurements of the old gentleman that she had cut off her topknot and gilded her hair. It was only to please herself. The strain of the Puritan in her blood ran lusty but colorless.

She mourned the old gentleman, but when he had died, she had reached her goal. Yes, now, enshrined in a last photograph in a fancy frame, she really had Uncle Harvey where she wanted him. She was happier without a man.

Of course, as Auntie Bissel and Alice proudly complained, they couldn't begin to show me everything. But although they differed in regard to the finest sights, there was one on which they were truly united. That was the Mausoleum.

But to see the Mausoleum was an event that couldn't be simply decided upon and undertaken some afternoon, as we would have "gone out to look at the cemetery" in Riverton. A day must be solemnly chosen, reservations made in advance. There were gardens, playgrounds, statues, lakes; and two sweet little churches: in the one celebrated weddings, in the other celebrated funerals, were held—the weddings and the funerals of "the stars." At an appointed hour, we were to sit and look our fill of the "exact reproduction" of the most famous sacred painting in the world, which was enshrined in the center of this glorious resting place of the unfortunate passers-on from Auntie Bissel's earthly paradise.

The day itself seemed charged with a mixture of worshipful solemnity and bland radiance. It was one of those truly golden California days, roses blooming, streets and houses bright in an air of eternal mild festival. Alice had asked for the afternoon off, and we set out in the not-quite-new sedan, Alice, with her pale vitality, driving and driving well. Both were dressed for the holiday, Alice wearing a picture hat she would certainly have thought too daring in Ohio, and Auntie Bissel perfumed and rouged with a kind of showy comeliness. Their sprightliness was like an effervescence of the fruit juices and health foods on which they lived. In spite of—I might almost say, because of!—the fact that we were visiting a mausoleum, we three set off in high festivity.

For when we entered the grounds, I felt that we were indeed entering the final scene of the great American fairy tale with its reso-

lutely happy ending. The place spread out before us from the top of a hill where we had paused for a bird's-eye view—acres and acres, in a weird combination of a "new development" and a sanctuary for what was outmoded and past. Here the melodrama of the journalists who love to place "the great events of birth and death" in heightened contrast was given full expression—all rendered both gruesome and innocuous in the peculiar bland empty brightness of the sunshine. There were famous burying grounds elsewhere in America. There was Plymouth, there was Gettysburg. Burying grounds in fact had marked the progress of the pioneers from whom both Auntie Bissel and Alice proudly traced descent. But other meager minds had conceived of these as resting places merely. Here that elementary purpose was draped in all the ribbons and roses of grandiose fancy with which I had always suspected that Auntie Bissel was able to adorn the passing of her loved ones. In spite of the melodramatic emphasis, we were not allowed long to mourn.

The place might have been designed so that the tastes of both Auntie Bissel and Alice would receive complete satisfaction. I thought of that as they showed me its wonders. There was the homey atmosphere that Auntie Bissel loved, but homey in the grand manner. Alice called my attention with satisfied awe to the statues which, powder-white with newness, were all "perfect replicas," and thus to her colonial wistfulness represented the acme of the "cultured." That journalistic flair for melodrama had certainly designed the two little churches, perfect replicas too, with names as redolently quaint as those of the winding roads in new residential sections—the one so theatrically devoted to marriage, the other to burial. The knowledge that the "wee little" church was "a restoration" made it beautiful in Alice's eyes; that it was a setting for the weddings of "the stars" filled Auntie Bissel with delight.

But now the hour of our appointment was at hand. Silence fell upon us as we approached the Mausoleum itself. In this great white building the modernistic latest and the exact reproductions were min-

gled in aesthetics gone mad. I felt again that we were walking on air. At the very door we were met with a symbol of that eternal youth and invulnerable happiness that were Auntie Bissel's religion. Here in these contemporary catacombs, the ancient gloomy symbols had been fittingly replaced by the statue of a child, a cunnin', fat and smiling tot, for which the model might have been one of Auntie Bissel's own magazine darlings. She had to pause for raptures; to wipe a tear from her eye, but with a beatific smile on her face, as she remembered Gracie.

We went with hushed tread to the seats where we might gaze unobstructed, well-planned-for awe upon the reproduction of the masterpiece. My thoughts wildly wandered. I noted Alice's uplifted look; with the irreverent conviction that she enjoyed this "perfect replica" far more than she ever could the somewhat age-worn original, which I felt sure, in its very age and authenticity, would have disappointed and repelled her. Auntie Bissel sat in restrained discomfort, subduing a tendency to the wiggles, that solemnly bogus reverence upon her face with which she might have felt it necessary to listen to "classical music"—to her all music was "classical music" which was not in the popular rhythms of the moment.

When a long and sufficient time had been allotted to our gazing, we got up, Auntie Bissel with obvious relief. There was still much to be seen—more than we ever could see, Auntie Bissel whispered with her old satisfaction in lavishness. I felt an awe as great as theirs, if differently directed, as I accompanied them through this ultimate sanctuary. This was the happy ending wrought in marble and gold. Again there was that most curious mixture of an exalted worship of the ancient, and the businesslike and efficient up-to-date aspect. For while the ashes of the truly great—"the stars"—reposed in urns more grandiose than those of the ancient Greeks (although replicas, no doubt), those of other humbler ones who had reached and passed on from their heaven on earth were stowed away in what resembled nothing so much as glorified white marble post-office boxes—and to make the resemblance

complete, and to give the whole idea of burial the personal touch, these boxes were labeled with "exact reproductions" in everlasting bronze of the actual autographs of the owners. One was made to feel truly, and in what strange significance, Auntie Bissel and her tribe had taken to heart the saying, "There is no death!"—but whether the whole represented a gigantically fatuous and pathetic wish, or the odd kernel of a further truth, who could dare to surmise? Or whether the Mausoleum itself was a monument to the death or the childhood of a race!

Auntie Bissel had been uncomfortable in the gazer's seat; but now she was in some mystic stratosphere of her "element." On her face was a mingling of tearful memory and rapture. This reached a climax when she whispered to me her dream of having Gracie and Uncle Harvey "transferred" to this glorified resting place. When she said that, a memory came over me—as I had seen the house with the L at the Spanish door of Auntie Bissel's new home—a memory of the cemetery in Riverton, the stones of an unimaginative yet fitting simplicity, where only the names stood out from the bleak flashing surfaces. I could see behind Alice's head in the picture hat—as if she were the figure in an Italian primitive—some lost family burial ground, with its forgotten headstones of native marble . . . lost among green hills of New England, that now—the early homesteads abandoned—have the quality of an old song accompanied by the lonely music of an evening cowbell. And this was where these two were to lie? This was what they had finally reached?

We left now; and with the final grandeur of this sight we were all happy, in spite of regrets upon both sides, that the visit should be over.

Auntie Bissel and Alice went into the kitchen to prepare a meal which they did not call a pickup lunch. I stayed in the garden awhile. The fairy lights of the city far beyond twinkled in lovely artificial magic. Beyond these fairy lights lay the empty-seeming, pale Pacific. The voices of Alice and Auntie Bissel, two notes in a larger strain, were mingled in the house. Again I had the sense of this place, this mixture

of the brand-new and the prehistoric old, this humanly conjured fairy-land, being a last stand in a mighty processional. Again, just as in the Riverton of my childhood, Auntie Bissel's voice seemed the more real of the two. Her note, if naïve and fabulous, was authentic. With Alice's "perfect replicas" the last word had been spoken—but not, perhaps, with Auntie Bissel's fat cunnin' little ones. There was in Auntie Bissel—with her celluloid dolls, her souvenirs—a fund of life that I did not see perishing even in the beautiful mystery of the Pacific—that ocean not redolent with deep-sea odors, which was the fairy sea forlorn to Alice's ancestral tribe. It was Uncle Harvey who belonged to Riverton, after all. The thought was strange indeed, of mingled tenderness and very wry laughter—the thought of Uncle Harvey, with his Santa Claus face and his easy provincial clothes, stowed away for eternity in one of the splendid post-office boxes. Neither could such grandeur hold the little dim ghost of Gracie in her albatross. But now I seemed to see it as fitting that the most effulgent blossom of this civilization—so pale, so scentless, so gaudy—should have taken the form of the Mausoleum. What was ahead for even Auntie Bissel but some form of "passing on"?—now that her dream had come true.

I seemed to be aware of a smothered violence surrounding this earthly paradise of which the happy voices in the house held little consciousness. Not forever would "foreigners" be content to bring the fabulous fruits to Auntie Bissel's convenient market. The land itself might not obey Auntie Bissel's tuneful promise (made in an effort to keep me here among the blessed) that it "wasn't gona shake no more no more." Fire and flood were hidden in the rugged hills, there might be destruction in the shining sea. The fairy lights might all go out. The stars might fall.

But Auntie Bissel was right. Her trust had been answered. She had found her promised land. She, the daughter of her race, had reached the grandiose ending of the long pilgrimage westward, and there she now dwelt, "provided for."

I could have my dream, too. It was, that when destruction came to

this glittering mirage-land, when some Samson shook the pillars on some final day, she would have "passed on," and her contented ashes be resting in a marble post-office shrine inscribed in indestructible bronze in her own garrulous handwriting:

"Auntie Bissel"