
MRS. VOGEL AND OLLIE

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But the charm of those vacations did not lie in the visits with Aunt Grace. Neither Aunt Grace's house nor her conversation had much to offer in the way of entertainment to a young girl, full of romantic fancy, and used to associating freely with older people. All my spare time was spent over at the Vogels'. My memories of Wood-

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side came to be centered around the Vogel place, and around Mrs. Vogel herself.

I think of that house. I see it in its setting, in the old part of town, with the woods and the two Spring Creeks beyond. It was a plain frame house, rambling in structure. Some painter of "the American scene" might have chosen it as typical of small town, part-rural life. Nothing much in itself, it seemed to blend with the landscape, to fit the changing weather, to be characteristic of each season in turn. On the sagging back porch, I see rough black walnuts scattered over gunny sacks, pale ground cherries spread on cheesecloth, half-ripe tomatoes in a row along the railing, bullheads flopping feebly in a wooden candy pail from the store; or piles of overshoes, a half-frozen rag rug with snow in all its stiff wrinkles—the way it looked once at Thanksgiving.

Aunt Grace had a fair-sized lot, neatly marked off into front yard, vegetable garden, flower beds, fruit trees, and place for the washing to hang. The Vogel lot took up about an acre. It was shocking to Aunt Grace, the way that place had been allowed to run wild. John Vogel would turn over in his grave. I told her I *liked* the place that way. She said, "Oh well, you don't know."

The Vogel back yard was like an outdoor attic, full of horticultural relics—old fruit trees, berry bushes, spreading patches of perennials. I used to pick some of the perennials and take them in to Mrs. Vogel, and she would accept them with the most ingenuous delight.

"Are those from here? Ain't they pretty? Somebody must have give me the seed and I stuck it in the ground and forgot where. Ollie," she would shout to her daughter, "come here once and see the nice bouquet. It come from our yard."

There were the ruins of swings, too far gone for use, but with local historical interest. I asked Ollie about them. This one, she told me—an old automobile tire dangling from an elm—she'd had LeRoy put up for Mother's second cousin's little granddaughter the summer the child

stayed here after having had the scarlet fever. That one, the Whitfield children had played with, when they lived across the road where the deaf and dumb couple lived now. The seat had been wide enough for three, and the ropes as big as your wrist—now there were only two frayed, tarnished strands left hanging. The broken-down lawn swing, Ollie confided, was where the old crowd used to do most of their courting. My own Aunt Grace had sat out there many a summer night! But Ollie wouldn't tell me with whom. " 'Twas all the good it did him," she remarked, in her tone of cryptic irony, which I accepted without question as Ollie's way of talking.

The orchard, Aunt Grace called a "witch's orchard." Her own was a miniature work of art, the tree trunks whitewashed to the correct height, and the blossoms sprayed at the right moment. "Go ahead, then," Aunt Grace used to tell me, "if you prefer wormy fruit! It takes no effort to get worms." Plums fell and made nests for themselves in the long matted grass in the Vogel orchard. They looked like piles of small Easter eggs, with a frosty smudge over their rich colors. When I picked up some to eat, the undersides were darkly rotted. Why should a misshapen russet apple partly dug out by wasps taste so much better to me, when I ate it under the gnarly trees, than one of Aunt Grace's fine Wealthies? I thought it had a special flavor. Everything did that grew in the Vogel garden.

"Now, Mother, we have to get after that garden." I can hear Ollie say that! "We can't wait with those plants another day."

Ollie would have everything ready. Then she would fume to no purpose.

"Look at the way Mother plants potatoes!"

Out on the back porch, in an old rocker, Mrs. Vogel would sit, chuckling, making a doll out of a seed potato.

"Mother's been working on that doll all morning. You see how our gardening goes!"

But some other morning, Mrs. Vogel would be up at four, work-

ing like an old peasant woman. And everything grew for her! Ollie said she planted with no more plan than little Dickie Wilts, who just grabbed a handful of seeds and threw them!

She had the same "hand" with animals as with plants. Children brought her their pets. "Mrs. Vogel, my dog won't eat." The animal was far gone that wouldn't respond to Mrs. Vogel. "Now, you eat for me," she would coax.

Ollie had got their own livestock down to one dog, Captain IV. He was so fat, his little old terrier legs looked brittle. There was nothing Mrs. Vogel couldn't do with that dog. He took anything from her. One day he came in muddy. Ollie had just put the clothes in to soak. Mrs. Vogel grabbed Captain, thrust him into the suds along with Ollie's house dresses and One-legged Joe's shirts (Mrs. Vogel begged the neighborhood bachelors to bring Ollie their washing!) and scrubbed him. "It's all washing, ain't it?" was her defense.

Once, I remember, Mrs. Vogel had taken it into her head that she was hungry for a nice bowl of berries. Dismayed, she came back into the kitchen with the empty bowl. "Ollie, where's our berries? What's happened? Looks like somebody's been in there picking!"

Ollie retorted, "What do you expect? You invite folks to come here any time. 'Pick what you want. We got lots. Just bring a pail over!'" Ollie mimicked Mrs. Vogel's air of expansive welcome.

"Well, the berries ain't wasted, then. Somebody got the good."

Ollie flashed a look at me. She always seemed to take it for granted that we shared some occult understanding. She stood scowling.

"Yes, Susie, and that's the way things go around here! This dump gets on my nerves. But I can't get rid of a thing, or Mother sets up a wail. Look at that old lawn swing. Nothing but kindling wood. And by the way, don't *you* ever try to sit in there, Susie! I don't want to send you back to your Aunt Grace with a broken leg. Oh, but the swing has to stay there! 'It's where Hansie and May Hollister used to sit!' You'd think Mother'd want to forget that. But of course—she don't know." I felt guilty: that was what Aunt Grace said about me—

"You don't know." Ollie said fiercely, "I'd like to see a bonfire!"

Then her exasperation faded into tender compunction. "Oh well, she wants it this way. It'll have to stay awhile. You know, Mother's a child."

Oh, how I—at twelve and thirteen—admired and adored an old woman who liked the things that children liked!

Mrs. Vogel loved giving and receiving presents. No company could leave the place without something to take home. "Here—you should take something back with you. Wait, let me fix you a basket."

Then she would go waddling out to the tool shed and hunt through her stack of baskets. She got Lonny Salsberry to bring her old grape baskets from the store. Ollie would groan.

"What do you suppose Mother's picking out there? We haven't a thing worth giving away. Once we did have nice fruit trees—when Papa was alive. That was when Mother started making up her baskets. They really *were* something then. Now, she thinks people are just as pleased to get them, filled up with old junk."

Mrs. Vogel would return beaming. Ollie would grab the basket. "Let's see what you've got in there. Mother! Aren't you the limit? Those little old green wormy runts of apples. Giving those away!"

"They'll do for pies."

"They'll do for the slop pail."

But Ollie would let the baskets go, until it came to sending one to my Aunt Grace. "Take this home to your Aunt Grace. It's just waste, tell her." As if I needed to tell her that! "She's not to send me anything in return. I don't want any return." Mrs. Vogel made one of her expansive gestures.

"There'll be no return," Ollie grimly muttered. She gave me private instructions to dump the stuff along the way. She wasn't going to have Grace insulted. "She may not know how to take Mother." I thought the basket too artistic to be spoiled. Mrs. Vogel had lined it with grape leaves, filled it with green apples and red plums, all imperfect, and in the center put a bouquet of velvet pansies. The whole

had a dilapidated charm. I hid the basket among some sumac. Next day when I looked for it, it was gone. Children had taken it, or Mrs. Fickel, the neighborhood scavenger. Well, as Mrs. Vogel would say—somebody got the good.

Why I should want to spend my time over at the Vogels', Aunt Grace simply couldn't see! A child who, at home, thought she must have the best of everything.

Aunt Grace told me that while Mr. Vogel was living, the family had been prominent in Woodside. But later, Mrs. Vogel had dropped out of church and club, and slipped back happily into her chosen ways—"reverted," Aunt Grace said. Ollie was distressed that she couldn't get her mother to go even to the Church Fair, one of Woodside's big events. "Them shoes you make me wear hurt me. If you'd let me go in these slippers." "Well, I *won't* let you go in those old felt slippers. I'd rather you'd stay home. Oh, you're just an old heathen, Mother! I don't know what to do."

"Don't do nothing. I don't."

"I should say you don't."

Mrs. Vogel refused to put herself out. She'd gone plenty in earlier years. If people wanted to see her now, they could come to her house.

People came. I wonder if Mrs. Vogel and Ollie spent a single day without company! The coffeepot was always on the stove. I remember with awe the enormous tin box from which Ollie would bring out coffeecake, rolls, cookies, a big cake with rich runny frosting—and everything baked fresh that morning. Whoever dropped by must step into the kitchen and have a cup of coffee.

"Come have a cup coffee! There's lots. Come on. You can set long enough for that."

The motley groups around that kitchen table extending nearly the length of the room! Aunt Grace said that anybody who had anything wrong with himself or herself just naturally drifted over to the Vogels'.

"So you see!" she pointedly told me.

Aunt Grace seriously considered whether she was doing right by my parents in allowing me to spend so much time at the Vogels'. Aunt Grace mourned because this older part of town was getting so run-down. When Grandpa and Grandma had decided to retire, and live in Woodside, this was where the nicest families had their houses. But Aunt Grace knew that my parents were "lenient." She knew that her own occasional callers, spinsters and widows, weren't too socially enlivening. Now and then she asked over some nice little girl to play, but it was a long way to her house from the other part of town. She wouldn't have known what to do with me around the house all day, either. So I ran off to the Vogels' whenever I pleased.

There I was always welcome. "Come in. Set down. There's always room for one more." I don't think I went for the food, although the food was wonderful. I went first because of Mrs. Vogel, then because of the fascination of house and yard, and then because of the other people I saw there: Mrs. Vogel and her circle.

That circle! First, Mrs. Vogel's old cronies. They would begin drifting over, when they'd got their own work done up, from three o'clock on.

As chief crony, I would name Mrs. Dee Slack: a widow woman, as she enjoyed calling herself, short, aging but lusty, tremendously broad in the bosom and beam. Mrs. Slack would come in chugging and puffing.

"Here's the old bad penny!" So she would announce herself. "Got any of my cookies today?"

Ollie kept caraway cookies on hand for Dee Slack. Dee would allow no fuss, no napkin or saucer. "Ollie, you know *me*. I like things common. My girl tells me, 'Mother, you eat like a hog.' Hogs are good feeders. I say, lead me to my trough!"

When there was a crowd around the table, Dee would take the occasion to get off one of her stories. All had the rank odor of the old-style tent show, of the wayside hotel room. Ollie used to get thoroughly

provoked. Mrs. Vogel would laugh in easy enjoyment. Afterward it would appear, however, that she hadn't got the point.

"Well, Mother, and you sat there and laughed! Didn't you even know what it was about?"

"Oh, it was just one of Dee Slack's stories. I never pay any attention."

"You might have some thought for our little girl, here."

"Susie don't need to pay attention, either. Just laugh and don't take it in. That's how I do. Dee has to enjoy herself her own way."

In almost fantastic contrast was another crony, Queenie—whom adoring parents had christened Queen Victoria Allerdycce. The father had been an Englishman, and had seen no American, certainly none living in Woodside, as a worthy match for his daughter. Ollie said she could well recall when Queenie was the loveliest girl in town; and even when I knew her, in a state of advanced ruin, she had a kind of fantastic beauty—a flash of sunken green eyes, a profile of bold yet delicate outline, a gesture of wierdly regal grace. Although she was becoming mentally hazy—"not responsible," was the way Aunt Grace and her friends put it—Queenie would not give up the column of "Woodside Echoes" which for years she had contributed to the county newspaper. I remember how she gathered her items, murmuring them over, hovering about the Vogel kitchen table—so that people in Woodside complained that Queenie's column was all about folks you never heard of outside the "Echoes."

"Mrs. Dee Slack called on Mrs. Vogel and Ollie Saturday afternoon."

"Jefferson Hite and family drove in Sunday from their country residence and took dinner at the Vogel home."

Any items more complex than these, Queenie was sure to get wrong. Mrs. Vogel tried to help her out by writing down some news, although it must have been almost as hard for Queenie to make out Mrs. Vogel's spelling as to get clear what people really said. Ollie protested.

"Those folks don't want it in the paper, Mother, every time they stick their noses inside our door. Those items are full of Vogels. Vogels don't make the only news in town."

At one point Ollie put her foot down. She was *not* going to have the weekly visits of LeRoy, her farmer friend, recorded. She wasn't going to find, among the "Echoes," read all over the county:

"LeRoy Vernon spent Saturday afternoon in Woodside mending Ollie Vogel's cellar door."

Mrs. Vogel said once, with gleaming eyes, "Why not? You should be proud of how he keeps coming."

"I guess you know why not as well as anybody! You, and that old mother of his!" Ollie went out of the room and banged the door.

I didn't know just what to make of LeRoy. I didn't know quite where he fitted in. He was the one person who came to see Ollie and not Mrs. Vogel. Every Saturday, he was there. Whatever was out of kilter, LeRoy fixed. Pleasant-faced and shy, in his faded blue pants and shirt, LeRoy worked about the place silent and efficient. "Oh, he gets paid for it," Dee Slack hinted slyly. That slid off me. Whether by his own choice or by Ollie's, LeRoy never joined the kitchen crowd. Ollie would beckon me aside, hand me a basket and murmur, "Susie, just kind of stroll out like you were going to pick some plums and give this to LeRoy in the orchard." LeRoy would eat in solitary comfort under the apple tree. "Tell her, thanks. Tastes good." I remember his blue eyes, gentle but evasive.

Then there were people from around the neighborhood—those whom Aunt Grace referred to as "the dregs." Aunt Grace once said bitterly that it seemed as if "the dregs" had all run down and settled in this older part of town. Here, in shabby houses which had seen better days, or in shacks and cottages, lived the odd, the solitary, and the left-behind who were "dregs" by Aunt Grace's stiff criterion: Woodside's one acknowledged Socialist (in that day, there were no Communists in Woodside), a bachelor handy man; the last survivor of a pioneer group of Middle-European tree grubbers, called One-legged Joe; and the

local poet, a small man with a Van Dyck beard, who lived alone in a greenish-painted cottage trimmed with broken wooden scrollwork, and who kept bees and raised iris and played the flute—"that old coot with the flute," Dee Slack described him.

Mrs. Fickel lived near by in a large decaying house at the foot of the hill. She hunted berries and sold them. ("She don't have to look far for berries!" Ollie significantly remarked, nodding toward their own bushes.) She lived with Ambrose, her sullen dark-browed "love son" (according to Dee Slack—I didn't know what the term meant, but it almost cast a glow of romance over Ambrose). Ambrose trapped and fished, and sometimes fell afoul of the law. "Well, I hear Ambrose is in the cooler again. The old lady won't have to support him for a while." It was all arranged, so Chad Brown, the Marxist handy man said, so that the Fickels could get ahead for a while on expenses—they and "the authorities" were in cahoots. There was said to be money, too, which came from the father of Ambrose—a mysterious sum, estimated all the way from fifty dollars to five thousand. By the way, I once innocently referred to this father as "Mr. Fickel," and long puzzled over Dee Slack's shout of rowdy glee; while Mrs. Vogel nodded in pleased approbation, saying, "That's real polite."

When any garment got too old even to make good rags, Mrs. Vogel used to say:

"This we maybe should give to Mrs. Fickel."

"Mother! Give away such a thing? It's not fit for a scarecrow."

"Mrs. Fickel don't care. She takes anything."

"We needn't *help* her to make a rag bag of herself."

"Oh, she don't need no help."

No matter what the Vogels gave—shoes three sizes too large, a jacket from twenty years back—Mrs. Fickel would turn up at the kitchen door the next day wearing the thing. It was a show, Mrs. Vogel said. "Ollie, quit sputtering, enjoy the show." Mrs. Fickel would wear anything, just so it had once belonged to somebody else!

Neighbors came in at all hours to use the telephone. I can hear

Mrs. Vogel: "Use it whenever you please. No use your putting in a phone. One's enough."

Then Ollie: "*Mother*. Are we running a free telephone exchange, as well as free lunch and laundry?"

"Well, we got the phone. We want it used."

"*We want it used.*"

The sarcasm made no impression upon Mrs. Vogel. "I like to hear them on the phone," she said, her eyes dancing. "Queenie should hear some of what I hear."

There were visitors sometimes from outside the circle. I remember when the new minister called. (Mrs. Vogel's name was still on the membership list, although she didn't attend.) Ollie wanted to take refreshments into the front room; she had a nice tray prepared. But Mrs. Vogel protested—that seemed so lonesome, he would enjoy a little company like the rest of us—leading him into the kitchen, and seating him in the midst of the circle: Mrs. Fickel and Ambrose, Queen Victoria, One-legged Joe; and, of course, Dee Slack. The minister was a good talker and kept the table entertained. When he had finished his cake and coffee, he said briskly, "Let us now bow our heads and give thanks for benefits received." Ambrose's long locks of rough dark hair almost brushed his plate; while his small eyes glanced obliquely at the minister. Dee Slack's face was red with suppressed laughter. As soon as the minister had left, the laughter broke out.

"Well, he was a smart one! Getting in thanks at the end, if he couldn't catch us at the beginning. He knows his job. If he hadn't been such a talker hisself, I had a story all ready." And she was going to tell it now.

But Ollie cut her short. "Once," Ollie said biting, "there was nothing out of the way in a preacher calling at this house. He can come every day as far as I'm concerned. And some others can stay home."

"Does that mean me?" Dee Slack tried to rise, but her front promontory got in the way, and she remained wedged, and half risen.

"I don't care who it means."

Ollie had tears in her eyes. This was another occasion when she went banging out of the room.

Mrs. Vogel said softly—it was her one explanation for Ollie's flare-ups—"She misses her papa." Dee Slack sat down.

There was one occasion, however, which capped the climax, and summed up forever the social spirit of the Vogel circle.

A bearded tramp had struck town and was going systematically from door to door; and now he had reached the Vogels'. He was a grand old specimen of his calling—tried no new tactics, rested splendidly on the traditional address. "Lady, could you give a poor old man a bite to eat?" Ollie was going to hand out food; she thought he could eat on the back porch, which was nice and shady. But—"No! Come in. Step inside," cried Mrs. Vogel; and she sat him down at the table next to Queenie, who sparkled, gestured, and tossed her head with its streaked and faded auburn hair. The fellow had a sonorous voice, rich and deep, like an old actor's, and a fund of the tallest stories ever heard even in that circle. Mrs. Vogel kept encouraging him. "Oh, ain't that wonderful?" Her brown eyes shone. Ollie was disgusted. Didn't Mother know the old rip was lying? Mrs. Vogel knew, but didn't care; listened like a child to fairy tales; laughed and laughed; filled the old tramp's coffee cup five times. He stayed all afternoon; and when he left, Mrs. Vogel urged, in her sweet, childlike, richly comfortable voice:

"Well, when you're going past again, stop in here. Yes. You do that."

"*Mother.*" Ollie's voice was despairing. "We can feed the tramps, but need we give them special invitations?"

Mrs. Vogel did look abashed. But she said, "Why are you so stingy? He enjoys a cup coffee like the rest of us."

From all my memories of Mrs. Vogel, how can I choose? She loved to go fishing. She went often to the Second Spring Creek in Dingbaum's Grove. Such tackle!—a willow pole, an old string, a bent hairpin, some worms Dicky Wilts had dug. But the fish bit for her,

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painted darkly in oils (from memory, I was told) by the bearded poet, "the old coot with the flute," hung on the sitting-room wall: a profile view, stiff as the head of a wooden rocking horse, but with the peculiar, piercing convincingness of a primitive.

But Hansie, the son, was at the center of the mystery. Once I questioned Aunt Grace.

"What did Hansie die of?"

"Didn't Ollie tell you?"

"No."

"Then she didn't care to have you told."

I was content to leave it that way, satisfied by my own dim conjectures. Hansie "should have married May Hollister"—I had heard Aunt Grace say that. Perhaps Hansie and May had both died for love, like Romeo and Juliet. Mrs. Vogel sometimes mentioned Hansie's name in her sweet childlike voice; yet in the innocence of her gaze, wide and ingenuous, wasn't there some strangeness? Ollie seldom spoke the name, nor did the cronies. Even Dee Slack looked embarrassed. Mrs. Fickel looked scared, and put up her hand to her mouth. I wished the poet had painted Hansie's portrait! But there was only a photograph, an enlarged snapshot in fact, in the small east room where Mrs. Vogel kept plants. Sometimes I would go in to see the ferns and the colored foliage; and then I would stand looking solemnly at the photograph in its round wooden frame. It was hard to find anything tragically mysterious in the picture of the fair-haired young man in shirt sleeves, smiling, and holding up a string of fish. I never saw any picture of May Hollister, but for some reason, I have no idea what, I saw her as the big-eyed fragile Greuze girl in "The Broken Pitcher." I never heard anyone mention May Hollister in terms of the present. Yet no one spoke of her as having died. She had vanished—lived forever in a faded, pastel-colored landscape, mourning for Hansie. Although certainly this romantic May, and the photographed Hansie, smiling, and squinting up his eyes in the sunshine, didn't match!

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Aunt Grace had looked angry and disgusted when I spoke Hansie's name. I shied away from more questioning.

The mystery was an overtone and undertone to Ollie's sputtering, Dee Slack's stories, and the slow, shy voice of LeRoy. The plant-scented air of the east room held it. I felt it when I looked at the broken-down lawn swing. When I stood alone one day, looking at Mr. Vogel's portrait, I felt something dire in the cold stare of the eye and the stiffness of the beard. A chill went over me, half delightful and half frightening. I ran out of the house. Mrs. Vogel, in her dirty wrapper and a man's straw hat with a hole in the crown (it must have been Mr. Vogel's old hat) was just coming to the house with a pailful of ripe tomatoes. She called to me, but I said Aunt Grace wanted me, I must go home. Aunt Grace welcomed me. Some ladies had dropped in, and she was serving coffee—I was to follow her, with paper napkins and a plate of cookies. The scene in the neat parlor, the chaste refreshments, the sound of women's voices, polite if not cultivated, were somehow a relief. The enlarged pictures of Grandpa and Grandma Edwards hung above the walnut settee; their faces open, familiar, uninteresting—but at least I knew how they had died, painfully but respectably, of recognized diseases, Grandma of pneumonia, and Grandpa of coronary thrombosis. Their funerals had been held in the Congregational Church.

2

Then followed years during which I lost track of events in Woodside. Aunt Grace had closed up her house, for the winter presumably, and gone to visit a cousin in California; but she liked the West Coast climate so well that she decided to stay. My connection with Woodside was almost broken. When I heard that Mrs. Vogel had died, I felt there was no reason for my ever going back to the town.

The Edwards house, however, had remained in Aunt Grace's possession; until one summer she made up her mind to return, put everything in order, and dispose of the entire property. Whether the house was rented or stood empty, either way it would deteriorate. The time for decision had come. I went over to spend several weeks with Aunt Grace, to help her pack and to pick out any pieces of furniture I wanted to keep for myself. A secondhand dealer from the county seat was taking the remainder of the furniture. There would be no auction. Aunt Grace didn't choose to have her belongings exhibited for the gaze of all and sundry.

During the interval when I didn't visit there, I had begun to think of Woodside, not merely as belonging to my own past, but as the past itself. Those afternoons at the Vogels' lost reality—sometimes it seemed to me I must have dreamed them. I stayed closely with Aunt Grace this summer, couldn't get over the feeling that her house was the only landmark that remained. But I said that I missed going over to the Vogels'. I supposed their house had been sold. Oh, no, Aunt Grace said. Why should it have been sold? Ollie was there.

And why didn't I go over? "I expect Ollie would like to have you come. No doubt she's been looking for you. *She* never goes off the place, any more than her mother did."

Absurdly enough, I was astonished to hear Aunt Grace say Ollie might be expecting me to call. I'd never considered Ollie apart from Mrs. Vogel. Aunt Grace's tone, by the way, was a little dry. And now it became ambiguous.

"Oh, yes, Ollie sticks there. People all supposed she and LeRoy would marry. Now with her mother gone, and his mother gone, nobody can see what's to keep them apart. They can't get up spunk for the move, maybe," Aunt Grace added with scorn—having made a decisive move herself, and one nobody expected from her—she had been thought a fixture in Woodside.

Absurdly too, I had never thought of LeRoy in the role of suitor. Of course, to a child, with high romantic notions, he hadn't much

looked the part. I was startled, and asked Aunt Grace—had Ollie and LeRoy been engaged?

She shrugged her shoulders. "*You tell me that.*"

If they weren't, why had LeRoy been going over to the Vogels' all these years? There had been some kind of understanding since high school days. "And that's a good while back, believe me." But he had *his* mother on his hands, and she had *her* mother on hers.

"Those two old women got a strangle hold and kept it."

At this—gratified as I was to have Aunt Grace speak to me in grown-up terms of downright flatness—I was indignant. What she said must be true of LeRoy's mother; I had heard her referred to more than once by Dee Slack as a "hell cat," "cobra," "old she-devil," to the apparent satisfaction of Ollie and Mrs. Vogel. And I knew, of course, that Aunt Grace had always condemned Mrs. Vogel on all sorts of counts: for her old dresses, the torn straw hats, the wormy fruit. But to me these were all discounted, offset, even glorified by the memory of the beaming smile and the shining brown eyes.

The day when I went over to the Vogels' once more was late in July, and marvelously clear after a rainy night. I went by the same short rutty crossroad, past the big lot where I had hid the basket under the sumacs. Such a short distance, but what a change from Aunt Grace's street, still well kept and decent, to this oldest street in town with its picturesque but decaying charm!

I kept looking around with a sense of wonder, because this was not a scene in a dream, but belonged to a real memory; and it was as if everything had been preserved for me to come and see on this very day. There stood the yellow-painted brick house of the deaf-and-dumb couple, before that the home of the Whitfield children, and before that the home of May Hollister—May must have stood beside that old pump, with her pitcher drooping, as in the Greuze vision; and there the gaunt house of the doctrinaire handy man, Chad Brown; the poet's dark green, viney cot; beneath the hill, the old Fickel house, more decayed, the porches blackish-white and rotting, the bushes jungle-

high. Across the dirt road, muddy after last night's rain, the road which led on over the First Creek bridge to Dingbaum's Grove, stood the rambling frame house of the Vogels.

The region was more beautiful than I had remembered, or perhaps realized. Yet I felt a shudder come over me which might have been recognition, in my nerves and bones, of some meaning in Aunt Grace's shrugged shoulders, her compressed lips, and disdainful tone.

As I went up the crumbled brick walk to the front porch, suddenly I could see nothing special about the Vogel house; and it did really look poorly kept beside Aunt Grace's neat house brought into perfect order this summer, because she would have been ashamed to offer it for sale any other way. Was *this* how I was going to see things now that I was grown up—all bare, clear, precise, in terms of good value or poor value for the money? It was an awful thought. I struggled for the charm of memory. Then suddenly came back to my inner vision the brown eyes, the silvery-brown curls, the joyous smile of Mrs. Vogel: that child world. The enchantment partly returned, and the old mystery deepened.

I knocked, and waited.

I was really looking for Mrs. Vogel. I had an awful fear that I might not recognize Ollie when she came to the door. I had never stopped to think just how Ollie did look.

And if I had met her on the street, I probably wouldn't have recognized her, because she looked like so many other women!—more so than formerly, when she hadn't had time to get her hair done or to change her dress in the afternoon. She was neater than the dimly remembered Ollie: wearing a nice polka-dot dress, and her hair cut and done in ridged waves and sausage curls. The hair was now more gray than black. She was now medium plump. The black eyes looked at me with more melancholy, but less snap and less strain. As Ollie stood in the doorway, I recognized both the likeness and the changes, with the same sense of wonder I had felt at my other recognitions when walking down this street.

When I thought of how nearly I hadn't come over—hadn't really considered coming, since Mrs. Vogel was not here—I was shamed by the warmth of Ollie's greeting. Aunt Grace's dry tone came back to me in reproach.

"Oh, I know who it is! I heard you were at Grace's. I began to wonder if you weren't ever coming over here! Come on in, Susie."

She took me into the well-remembered sitting room. There was still the brownish wall paper, smoky around the stovepipe hole, the miscellany of chairs, the smell of carpets and cushions and old velvet-covered sofa; and in the smaller room beyond, the ferns and foliage were fresh and alive on their wire stand in the east window. The change lay in the neatness and quiet! no clack and cluck of women's voices, coos and cries of babies (Ollie and Mrs. Vogel had often "kept" babies for mothers who went downtown), no snorts and puffings of dogs; no rattle of stove lids; or yelling back and forth from the kitchen. The stiff, old, darkly muddy oil profile of Mr. Vogel presided over this strange stillness.

But I didn't so much notice the quiet at the very first. It grew upon me. After the first warmth of greeting had subsided, Ollie and I exchanged polite conversation. She asked me where I was keeping myself, what I was doing these days, and how was my Aunt Grace. I might think Ollie would have got over to see Grace, since she was only in the next street—

"But I don't know what becomes of the time, Susie. I seem to have less of it now than when I had more to do. I plan, but—well, I don't know, I guess I'm getting old and lazy."

A pause followed—and then the realization of that quietness was complete. There was no one else in the house!—not a soul beside ourselves. Had that ever happened before in all the times I had come over to the Vogels'? The very air was empty. I missed the smell of coffee, of cooking and baking from the kitchen.

One of us had to break the silence. I asked, "Don't you have Captain the Fourth?"

That question got Ollie started. "No, Captain's been gone a good while. He took sick one night and was gone before daylight. I don't know what he could have had. But he was old." Ollie seemed to be pleading. "Honestly, I don't know just how old that dog was! And of course Mother overstuffed him—fed him every time he whimpered. Oh, I kind of miss him. A person gets attached. But he was a care. And then his hairs got over everything. At least our sofa cushions don't have animal hairs on them! I can offer folks a seat." Ollie's voice had risen in argument; and she must have talked this out with somebody or other more than once. "But of course"—her gaze wandered—"he was Mother's dog. He was company. Does it seem lonely here to you, Susie? I expect it does, with nobody but me."

I started to answer, in some confusion. Ollie was now staring straight at me. I looked into her eyes—into a depth of tenderness, exasperation, strain, questioning, loneliness, bleakness—how different from her mother's shining, enchanted gaze!

Ollie said to me, "You knew Mother was gone?"

I told her I did know it, my sense of loss, my first feeling that I didn't want to come to Woodside ever again. Ollie's lips trembled, then were compressed. She kept nodding. But after a moment, she only pretended to listen. Speech must have been gathering in her—and when I stopped talking, suddenly the words poured out.

"Yes, Mother's gone. It's three years now, Susie, but I haven't got used to it."

As she went on, I realized that there had been nobody to whom she could talk freely, nobody with fresh attention to give. She had always treated me as if we were well-agreed contemporaries, even when I was twelve—and when it had been far from true! Now she resumed her old tone.

She told me first about her mother's last days. Mother had had a bad heart—she might go any minute, and she might linger and linger. *She* didn't know it, but Ollie did. She was sick now and then, had kind of spells, thought she might have eaten too hearty, but on

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the whole, hadn't suffered much. Ollie couldn't let her know her condition. Mother had never looked on the dark side of things.

"I didn't try to stop her doing any of the things she enjoyed—going fishing, catching those horrid little minnows, making up her baskets—well, *you* know, Susie. I let all those folks come over here just the same—even if it wasn't good for her to drink so much coffee. I knew the one thing that would take Mother off faster than anything else was to be unhappy. She couldn't stand to be unhappy." Ollie shook her head. She repeated in a grave tone, what I had heard her say years ago, "You know, Mother was a child." Now I felt the words sink into my mind, and understanding branch from them.

But Ollie was going on with her narrative. No, she hadn't been able to change things much, but she had tried to keep them from bearing down. When that gang sat too long at the table, she would shoo 'em out, tell 'em she had to clean the kitchen. "They all knew I was cross, so I guess they just thought I was getting meaner as I got older, like some animals do. I did get meaner. With all I had on my mind, it was hard to cook for that gang. For Dee Slack. Ambrose! Wouldn't you have thought they would have seen there was trouble? But of course I didn't want 'em to see. I didn't want any of them to get hold of it. They wouldn't have kept it from Mother.

"All I was trying to do, Susie"—she turned to me—"was to keep Mother happy to the last. That was the one thing Papa said to me in his sickness." Her voice became solemn. "He said, 'Ollie, I put Mother in your charge. Keep her happy.' Well, she was." Ollie brooded.

Animation touched her face then, and even a smile.

"The last thing was a birthday party. I had 'em all here. All those folks, you remember them, Susie"—Did I!—"who kept on coming to the house. I had everything the way Mother liked it. I made that peppermint-candy ice cream and cake with pink frosting, twelve candles—you know, her tastes were just like children's, younger than yours when you used to visit us! You were past dolls. LeRoy brought

me chickens. Poor fellow, he had to sneak 'em out of his own chicken yard, that old mother of his would have burst a blood vessel if she'd known he was going to take anything to *me*. But she knew how to *raise* chickens. I'll say that for her. And I got many a chick of hers, too, the old tyrant!" Ollie said in a burst of satisfaction. "So we had chicken, and mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, fresh tomatoes—everything Mother liked. My, how she loved that dinner! Jeff Hite and Milly came in, and brought some of Milly's blackberry wine, and we had wine with our dinner, and Otis Witherspoon—you remember him, the one that painted Papa's picture—he read a long poem. I thought it would never stop, but Mother just loved it. She loved to be written poetry to. I've kept all those poems. I don't know as he's a good writer, he never got anything published. But they're nearly all about *her*. Then I asked everybody to bring in some foolish toy. I've kept them all. I'll show them to you. Not that they amount to anything—but you know how Mother was about toys; and some folks, like One-legged Joe, didn't have but a few cents to spend. Wasn't it an awful queer mixture, the crowd we had? But I believe they all had a good time. I know Mother did. I was bound she was to enjoy that day completely. I had a kind of presentiment."

Ollie sat quiet again, brooding.

"I don't think that party hurt her. She slept that night. What hurt her was going out at three in the morning to pick berries. She'd took the notion that *this* year we were going to have some of our own berries! So there she was—out there in the wet grass—oh, dear! But Doc Boynton said it was bound to come some way—and nothing hurt Mother more than to keep her from enjoying herself. Poor little soul!" Ollie stopped, and held her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I'm sure glad Captain didn't go before she did," Ollie then resumed, in a matter-of-fact tone. "She couldn't stand even to hear about dying. No, I don't think anything troubled her before she went. The last thing she said was, didn't we have a good time on her birthday."

Ollie went to the coat closet, and took down from the shelf a

large white pasteboard box tied with gold string. In it were the birthday relics, the dime-store toys, the dried rose petals, the half-burned pink candles, the little petrified pieces of birthday-cake frosting—the poem, inscribed on a rolled foolscap bound with ribbons.

"You don't need to read that long thing now," Ollie said somewhat impatiently. But I did look into it enough to catch its style, fulsome and rolling, breaking into wordy flourishes, like old fashioned fancy penmanship; and repeating "our queen with eyes of brown."

Ollie told me her mother had said, "Susie ought to be here. There's everybody here but Susie."

What a shame I couldn't have tasted the cake! But these old hunks were past gnawing. Ollie soberly put the box back on the shelf.

She now began to think of the present. She said she bet this was the first time I'd ever come to this house and not been offered a bite to eat. She could at least have offered me a cup of coffee. It would take no time on the oil stove. Their old range she didn't keep going.

"Oh, I'm glad to have that range out! Not to bake every day of my life." She burst out: "I'm glad to have that crowd all gone! Not to have to listen to Dee Slack's stories! My, how I used to burn, thinking what Grace Edwards would say if she knew her niece was listening to such stories!" I said they didn't hurt me. Ollie sighed. No, she guessed I was like Mother—too young to take in the point. Brooding on Dee Slack, Ollie cried out again, how sick she had got of baking those caraway cookies! Setting and unsetting that table. She'd had LeRoy help her, and they'd taken out all the leaves of the table, made it small size.

"All the same, Susie," Ollie said, turning toward me, "I didn't feel so good, after Mother was gone, to find folks never came over. Those folks let me cook for them as if I was an attachment to the kitchen stove. But when they found I wasn't keeping it up, they quit coming. Oh, I would have made some coffee for anybody came in. But I couldn't keep up all that baking, now could I? I tell you, I was tired, Susie. I was *tired*."

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Ollie was facing me. I could see that she *was* tired. The strain was not yet gone from her neck and mouth, although she had gained weight.

"Oh, they're not all so bad," Ollie hastened to say, ashamed of her outburst. "Jeff and Millie Hite stop in when they're in town. One-legged Joe came. Of course, I still washed his shirts for him. But most, when they found out I wasn't running a free boardinghouse never showed up. I *did* feel kind of bad when Otis Witherspoon stayed away. I'd washed *his* shirts, too. And Susie, maybe he was a poet, and played the flute and all that, but his *shirts* . . . Of course," Ollie summed up soberly, "I knew Mother was the attraction. But all the same—!"

She told me I was the one person, besides the Hites, who had come to see her. I was ashamed.

Ollie seemed to struggle with herself. "Oh, well, how can I blame them. There was nobody like Mother, ever. She was like the honeycomb, Otis wrote, full of sweetness—everybody clustered round her. She was so much fun! People always had fun when Mother was around. When she was happy. But it took something to keep her happy! The others never thought of that. It took lots of effort, with Papa and me both. We never shared troubles with Mother—we took them ourselves. All the time Papa was sick, he had to pretend it was indigestion, he would be better in a few days. I don't know if she knows yet it was cancer." Ollie whispered the word. "There was no living with Mother if she was unhappy."

Ollie was silent—then said abruptly, "You know about Hansie?"

Well, there could be no harm in telling me now. Hansie was engaged to May Hollister, across the street. They had been going together since they started high school. Hansie went to Corbin City to get a job. He worked for a friend of Papa's, who was in the hotel business. Hansie wanted to learn the hotel business. He was so genial, everybody liked him. It would be just the business for him. There was a run-down hotel at the Lake, near Corwin City, which Hansie and

May planned to take over. Hansie was having repairs made. He would come home for a visit every little while, and then he would spend nearly every minute with May. He was just like always, happy and smiling. No one suspected anything wrong. But there was a girl who worked some at the hotel, and—"I guess 'twas the old story." Hansie'd promised to marry her. He let the preparations for his wedding to May go on. The dress was all made. Hansie wrote that he was going to the Lake to look things over. He would get a room ready in the old hotel where he and May could spend their honeymoon. But it was the other girl who was there. Hansie did considerable hunting in the woods around the Lake. He was up in the room, cleaning his gun, to go hunting. Folks around the Lake heard a shot. It was called an accident. "We all might have thought it an accident"—Ollie gave me a strange look—"but he'd sent a letter—

"I tell you that now, Susie, but then nobody knew it. The letter came to May Hollister, telling how he couldn't face the situation, he would rid the world of himself. May brought the letter over to me. She gave it to me. I put it away, thinking I'd destroy it—but somehow I couldn't, and I've got it still. I'm not saying where. Maybe I should have told Mother about it, at least. But I didn't dare. She always thought Hansie shot himself accidentally. The verdict was 'accidental.' This girl ran off and never was found. Maybe nobody knew about *her*, except me and May Hollister . . . Or maybe Mother *did* know. She made queer references sometimes."

Ollie and I went into the smaller room and looked at Hansie's picture. He was like his mother, with the comely face, and smiling eyes and mouth. I asked if there was a picture of May Hollister. I might as well lose all the old illusions. Ollie found one in an album—a picture of a tall girl, with a fair pompadour, a strong jaw, a homemade dress that bunched around the waist. The large-eyed Greuze vision faded into summer air. I asked what had become of May. Did she marry someone else? No, Ollie said. May went to Chicago, and got a job clerking, and was there still.

"Mother never asked about her. That shows, don't you think? She'd always counted May Hollister a real daughter. May was over here half the time. But after May left, when she didn't write or anything, Mother never inquired. She talked about May, but it was always about the time when those two were engaged, when May and Hansie used to sit out in that old lawn swing.

"I think the fact that Hansie deceived May was what hurt her most. She could have stood it if he had told her in time. But he was like—well, I know what he did was wrong, as well as anybody . . .

". . . yes. I was always afraid somebody would blurt out about it. If they knew. They suspected, but they didn't know. If it was against the law to keep that letter secret, then May and I are criminals. She and I are the only ones who have ever known. Now *you* know." Ollie looked at me with solemn eyes. The old shivering sense of darkness came over me—but it was no longer delightful. "It was awful hard to live with Mother all those years, and hear her talk about Hansie, and never say one word. Oh, I've had to do a lot of things to keep my promise to Papa! But I couldn't stand to see those brown eyes of hers cloud up. That's the truth of it."

Well—we would go into the kitchen and have some coffee. The coffee did not taste the same, made in a small pot on the oil burner. Ollie had only store cookies in the house.

So I remembered those old times? Ollie asked me. I told her about my wonder at the long table—recalled Mrs. Vogel's invitation to the tramp. Ollie listened to me with a strange expression. Yes, that was the way people felt about it, she said. They all enjoyed themselves around Mother.

And did I remember all those folks? Some were still around. Mrs. Fickel lived in her old house. She picked wild berries, plums and nuts; and then in the early mornings she would be seen in the neighborhood swiping vegetables out of the gardens. Ollie often saw her in this garden.

"But I don't have my mother's soft heart. I don't try to catch

her, but I don't raise my vegetables *for* her. I rattle the window shade, and she skidoos."

Ambrose had got into real trouble and was now in the penitentiary.

If I had come just a week earlier, I could have seen One-legged Joe! Ollie would have taken me over to his shack. I'd have seen how neat he kept that little one room. Ollie always spoke wistfully of neatness and order. She told me Joe had quite a history. He was the last survivor of the Austrian tree grubbers who had been brought to this country years ago, when folks were still clearing the land. Then Joe was only a boy. It was in the woods that he got his leg chopped off. He was drunk, and thought the leg was a tree trunk—did it himself, some said. Joe might have taken a few drinks, but he never made any disturbance around the neighborhood. He kept his good nature.

"And that's hard. Believe me, that's hard."

In his last illness, it became plain that he must go to the hospital. Ollie was the one to tell him. He took the news with the greatest cheerfulness—"So now Joe is kaput!" There was no one for him to leave—just the clean little shack, with its cot and stove, table and kitchen chairs. He died two days later in the county hospital.

The saddest story was that of Queen Victoria Allerdycce. And it seemed to sum up certain aspects of this old part of Woodside. For years, Queenie had been hanging onto that little job of hers, writing the Woodside "Echoes."

Queenie grew very sensitive about her failing memory. "I guess you could see her mind was failing." She thought as long as she could gather news, it seemed to show that she was all right. But people got tired of trying to tell her things, the items came out so twisted. "She wouldn't allow anybody but Mother to write things down for her. Mother could do it just the right way. She called it writing down her diary. She let Queenie look over her diary and correct the spelling."

Then after Mother was gone, Queenie made up her items. They were even worse than the so-called news items Mother had given her. It

broke Queenie's heart when the new editor hired another correspondent. "That may sound silly, Susie. That little half-column didn't bring in pin money. But it was all Queenie had outside her own head. It kept her from going *clear* off." Queenie had gone "clear off" at last. But Ollie didn't blame the new editor. "He did what had to be done. It should have been done earlier."

The only member of the old circle against whom Ollie really felt bitter was Mrs. Dee Slack. The years she'd entertained Dee, you might have thought Dee would feel a little appreciation. "But when she snooped in once or twice, and found I didn't have those cookies ready baked, she took offense." Ollie had talked back. "I guess it had been gathering for years, but while Mother lived, feelings were all bottled up." Ollie had never liked Dee Slack. "You know how she is, Susie—awful coarse. Mother never seemed to care or notice. But I always partly blamed Dee for encouraging Mother to be a heathen—not care how she dressed, never go to church, not keep up with the old friends she and Papa used to have." The worst was, the stories Dee Slack told around about Ollie and LeRoy.

"I'm not going to repeat them to you, Susie. But after all I did for Dee Slack, the meals I got her—!"

There was a knock, not very loud, conspiratorial-sounding.

Ollie put down her cup. "That sounds like—" She went to the kitchen door. "I *thought* that sounded like—!" Then I heard her urging, "Oh, come on in. Yes, there's someone here, but you don't need to mind. Come on."

Her persuasion failed, however. I would have to go outside. I was already prepared to see the tall figure of LeRoy, in faded blue overalls.

"Do you know who this is? Think back a ways. You've never seen her grown up."

"Must be Susie!" LeRoy's face lost its embarrassment, settled into its pleasant look. Even so, he wouldn't come into the house. Did he want coffee? Oh, he guessed he might take a cup, but he thought he'd

sooner drink it out here. Susie used to bring him his lunch, he guessed maybe she would now. He grinned at me—but he wouldn't meet my eyes. Ollie sputtered, but poured out a big cupful of coffee and gave me a plate of cookies, and I gave them to LeRoy, who ate them sitting on the wash bench. I went inside, while he talked with Ollie. I heard the murmur of their voices. Finally Ollie returned.

Her face was slightly flushed. "I didn't expect him. He hardly ever gets in except on Saturdays. But of course since the old lady's gone, he's his own boss, and I expect he likes to kite around some." Ollie shrugged her shoulders, with tolerant irony.

I started to say that I was sorry I had kept LeRoy from coming in—

Ollie interrupted me. "You had nothing to do with it. He never comes in here, except in the wintertime, unless there's something needs fixing. Well . . ." She hesitated, then continued: "The fact is, Susie, he got into that habit, kind of, when there were so many people here. There were too many questions. Then Dee Slack—you can imagine the kind of jokes she would have made. And you can't tell, Queenie might have put it in the paper in spite of everything. His old vixen of a mother was so jealous, he'd never have got here again!"

She was silent, slowly sipping her coffee, disgustedly biting into a tasteless cookie. "If I'd known you'd be over today, I'd had something better than this. I'd be glad to do a little baking when it's appreciated."

"But couldn't you and LeRoy get married now?" I asked Ollie earnestly.

"Oh, we could. But 'twould seem kind of foolish for us to get married after all these years. LeRoy's contented there, and I am here—kind of contented. I s'pose you'd call it contented."

Now I recalled old stories, old occurrences . . . the people in the circle laughing slyly when I went out to the orchard with my basket, asking me when I came back whether "Red Ridinghood saw the wolf." LeRoy never had driven directly to the Vogel house, but had left his car parked under some trees on a side road. He had brought sweet corn,

apples, nuts; but his presents were left in pails in a corner of the porch or out in the tool shed. I don't know whether it was true that Mrs. Vogel resented him. There was an ambiguity about the whole thing.

Ollie stood up. Why were we sitting over this empty coffeepot? We went out into the back yard. It showed a few evidences of Ollie's orderliness. LeRoy had taken a scythe to the grass, had cut down a few of the worst plum trees. But the place was very much the same, too much the same, run-down and getting sordid. The lawn swing was gone, but its wooden foundation was left, ugly and rotting.

Ollie took me into the tool shed and showed me a pile of dusty grape baskets. "I'm as bad as Mother keeping things—I've never got rid of these baskets because they made me think of her."

Where was that "bonfire" I used to hear about? the "clean sweep"? Ollie felt too the depression of the whole unclarified situation.

"Maybe I might go out on the farm with LeRoy after all some of these days! Surprise everybody!"

"Ollie, why shouldn't you?"

She said, "It'd be awful hard to tear myself away from this old place. If LeRoy would come here—! But he feels the same, attached to *his* place. Both of us are like two old animals, I guess, each hanging round his own spot, even when the folks are gone. LeRoy and I are the grownups, we both spoiled our two old children. Now it don't seem as if two grownups can get together."

Ollie began to cry. "This place is so full of memories of Mother! Sometimes I don't want to stay here at all. Otis Witherspoon told somebody he couldn't bear this house with the light gone from it. But I did a lot to keep that light shining! Oh, they could all come back, and I'd bake cake and cookies, if they'd just recognize they wouldn't have had all those good times if there hadn't been somebody to stand at the stove! Well, I know I'm ordinary. Maybe the cooking was my part."

We had come out again to the orchard. Ollie picked up and threw down a little hard misshapen green plum. "LeRoy has nice apples out there," she said irrelevantly.

She turned to me. She was trembling. She said almost in a whisper, "All these years! These years. I never said one word until today. Papa didn't know what he was asking. I didn't know, either, what it would mean to keep my promise. I never even told LeRoy what I told you. I mean, what it said—I mean, Hansie's letter. If I was to marry LeRoy, I'd have to tell him what I haven't told him all these years. I don't know how he would take it. I couldn't marry him otherwise. It wouldn't be right."

Some of the old enchantment still lingered out here in the orchard. Its aftermath was centered in the small east room, with the fresh and earthy smell of the plants—with Hansie's smiling picture on the wall. The profile of Mr. Vogel kept direful watch in the sitting room. I thought again of Mrs. Vogel, of her shining eyes. But she was remote, a memory of childhood. The tense, hard, deeply affectionate, little ordinary figure of Ollie rose larger—the fiber of her character upholding all.

"Come back again," Ollie urged when I left—looking pleased and enlivened, so that again I was ashamed. "We'll have something decent to eat. I know there's not much doing, not much to offer, with Mother not here."

I said, "I'll come to see *you*."