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Robert W. Chambers

Athalie

EAN 8596547164067

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I

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WHEN Mrs. Greensleeve first laid eyes on her baby she knew it was different from the other children.

"What is the matter with it?" she asked.

The preoccupied physician replied that there was nothing the matter. In point of fact he had been admiring the newly born little girl when her mother asked the question.

"She's about as perfect as they make 'em," he concluded, placing the baby beside her mother.

The mother said nothing. From moment to moment she turned her head on the pillow and gazed down at her new daughter with a curious, questioning expression. She had never gazed at any of her other children so uneasily. Even after she fell asleep the slightly puzzled expression remained as a faint crease between her brows.

Her husband, who had been wandering about from the bar to the office, from the office to the veranda, and occasionally entirely around the exterior of the road-house, came in on tiptoe and looked rather vacantly at them both.

Then he went out again as though he was not sure where he might be going. He was a little man and mild, and he did not look as though he had been created for anything in particular, not even for the purpose of procreation.

It was one of those early April days when birds make a great fuss over their vocal accomplishments, and the brown earth grows green over night—when the hot spring sun draws vapours from the soil, and the characteristic Long

Island odour of manure is far too prevalent to please anybody but a native.

Peter Greensleeve, wandering at hazard around the corner of the tavern, came upon his business partner, Archer B. Ledlie leisurely digging for bait in the barn-yard. The latter was in his shirt-sleeves—always a good sign for continued fair weather.

"Boy?" inquired Ledlie, resting one soil-incrusted boot on his spade.

"Another girl," admitted Greensleeve.

"Gawsh!" After a moment's rumination he picked up a squirming angle-worm from the edge of the shallow excavation and dropped it into the empty tomato can.

"Going fishing?" inquired Greensleeve without interest.

"I dunno. Mebbe. Your boy Jack seen a trout into Spring Pond."

Ledlie, who was a large, heavy, red-faced man with a noticeably small mouth, faded blue eyes, and grey chin whiskers, picked a budding sprig from a bush, nibbled it, and gravely seated himself on the edge of the horse-trough. He was wearing a cigar behind his ear which he presently extracted, gazed at, then reconsidering the extravagance, replaced.

"'Boy?' inquired Ledlie, resting one soil-incrusted boot on his spade."

"Three gals, Pete—that's your record," he remarked, gazing reproachfully out across the salt meadows beyond the causeway. "They won't bring you in nothin'," he added, shutting his thin lips.

"I kind of like them," said Greensleeve with a sigh.

"They'll eat their heads off," retorted Ledlie; "then they'll git married an' go off some'rs. There ain't nothin' to gals nohow. You oughtn't to have went an' done it."

There seemed to be no further defence for Greensleeve. Ledlie continued to chew a sprig of something green and tender, revolving it and rolling it from one side of his small,

thin-lipped mouth to the other. His thin little partner brooded in the sunshine. Once he glanced up at the sign which swung in front of the road-house: "Hotel Greensleeve: Greensleeve and Ledlie, proprietors."

"Needs painting, Archie," he volunteered mildly.

"I dunno," said the other. "Since the gunnin' season closed there ain't been no business except them sports from New York. The bar done good; that's all."

"There were two commercial men Wednesday week."

"Yes, an' they found fault with their vittles. They can go to the other place next time," which was as near as Ledlie ever came to profanity.

After a silence Ledlie said: "Here come your kids, Pete. I guess I'll let 'em dig a little bait for me."

Down the road they came dancing, and across the causeway over Spring Pond—Jack, aged four, Doris, three, and Catharine, two; and they broke into a run when they caught sight of their father, travelling as fast as their fat little legs could carry them.

"Is there a new baby? Is there a new baby?" shouted Jack, while still at a distance.

"Is it a boy? I want another brother! Is it a boy?" shrilled Doris as she and baby Catharine came panting up with flushed and excited faces.

"It's a girl," said Greensleeve mildly. "You'd better go into the kitchen and wash your faces."

"A girl!" cried Jack contemptuously. "What did mamma do that for?"

"Oh, goodness!" pouted Doris, "I didn't want any more girls around. What are you going to name her, papa?"

"Athalie, I believe," he said absently.

"Athalie! What kind of name is that?" demanded Jack.

"I dunno. Your mamma wanted it in case the baby was a girl."

The children, breathing hard and rapidly, stood in a silent cluster looking up at their father. Ledlie yawned frightfully, and they all instantly turned their eyes on him to discover if possible the solitary tooth with which rumour credited him. They always gazed intently into his mouth when he yawned, which irritated him.

"Go on in and wash yourselves!" he said as soon as speech became possible. "Ain't you heard what your papa told you!"

They were not afraid of Mr. Ledlie; they merely found him unsympathetic, and therefore concerned themselves with him not at all.

Ignoring him, Jack said, addressing his father: "I nearly caught a snake up the road. Gee! But he was a dandy."

"He had stripes," said Doris solemnly.

"He wiggled," asserted little Catharine, and her eyes became very round.

"What kind was he, papa?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, just a snake," replied Greensleeve vaguely.

The eager faces of the children clouded with disappointment; dawning expectancy faded; it was the old, old tragedy of bread desired, of the stone offered.

"I liked that snake," muttered Jack. "I wanted to keep him for a pet. I wanted to know what kind he was. He seemed very friendly."

"Next time," suggested Ledlie, "you pet him on the head with a rock."

"What?"

"Snakes is no good. There's pizen into 'em. You kill every one you see an' don't ask questions."

In the boy's face intelligence faded. Impulse lay stunned after its headlong collision with apathy, and died out in the clutch of ignorance.

"Is that so, papa?" he asked, dully.

"Yes, I guess so," nodded Greensleeve. "Mr. Ledlie knows all about snakes and things."

"Go on in an' wash!" repeated Ledlie. "You don't git no supper if you ain't cleaned up for table. Your papa says so, don't you, Pete?"

Greensleeve usually said what anybody told him to say.

"Walk quietly," he added; "your poor mamma's asleep."

Reluctantly the children turned toward the house, gazing inquiringly up at the curtained window of their mother's room as they trooped toward the veranda.

Jack swung around on the lower step:

"Papa!" he shouted.

"Well?"

"I forget what her name is!"

"Athalie."

CHAPTER II

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HER first memories were of blue skies, green trees, sunshine, and the odour of warm moist earth.

Always through life she retained this memory of her early consciousness—a tree in pink bloom; morning-glories covering a rotting board fence; deep, rich, sun-warmed soil into which her baby fingers burrowed.

A little later commenced her memory of her mother—a still, white-shawled figure sewing under a peach tree in pink bloom.

Vast were her mother's skirts, as Athalie remembered them—a wide white tent under which she could creep out of the sunlight and hide.

Always, too, her earliest memories were crowded with children, hosts of them in a kaleidoscopic whirl around her, and their voices seemed ever in her ears.

By the age of four she had gradually understood that this vaguely pictured host of children numbered only three, and that they were her brother and two sisters—very much grown up and desirable to play with. But at seven she began to be surprised that Doris and Catharine were no older and no bigger than they were, although Jack's twelve years still awed her.

It was about this time that the child began to be aware of a difference between herself and the other children. For a year or two it did not trouble her, nor even confuse her. She seemed to be aware of it, that was all.

When it first dawned on her that her mother was aware of it too, she could never quite remember. Once, very early in her career, her mother who had been sewing under the peach tree, dropped her work and looked down at her very steadily where she sat digging holes in the dirt.

And Athalie had a vague idea in after life that this was the beginning; because there had been a little boy sitting beside her all the while she was digging; and, somehow, she was aware that her mother could not see him.

She was not able to recollect whether her mother had spoken to her, or even whether she herself had conversed with the little boy. He never came again; of that she was positive.

When it was that her brother and sisters began to suspect her of being different she could not remember.

In the beginning she had not understood their half-incredulous curiosity concerning her; and, ardently communicative by nature, she was frank with them, confident and undisturbed, until their child-like and importunate aggressiveness, and the brutal multiplicity of their questions drove her to reticence and shyness.

For what seemed to amaze them or excite them to unbelief or to jeers seemed to her ordinary, unremarkable, and not worthy of any particular notice—not even of her own.

That she sometimes saw things "around corners," as Jack put it, had seemed natural enough to her. That, now and then, she seemed to perceive things which nobody else noticed never disturbed her even when she became aware that other people were unable to see them. To her it was as

though her own eyesight were normal, and astigmatism the rule among other people.

But the blunt, merciless curiosity of other children soon taught Athalie to be on her guard. She learned that embarrassed reserve which tended toward secretiveness and untruth before she was eleven.

And in school she learned to lie, learned to deny accusations of being different, pretended that what her sisters accused her of had been merely "stories" made up to amuse them.

So, in school, she made school-life endurable for herself. Yet, always, there seemed to be *something* between her and other children that made intimacies impossible.

At the same time she was conscious of the admiration of the boys, of something about herself that they liked outside of her athletic abilities.

She had a great many friends among the boys; she could out-run, out-jump, out-swim any of them in the big country school. She was supple and trim, golden-haired and dark-eyed, and ready for anything that required enterprise and activity of mind or body. Her ragged skirts were still short at eleven—short enough not to impede her. And she led the chase for pleasure all over that part of Long Island, running wild with the pack from hill to tide-water until every farmer in the district knew "the Greensleeve girl."

There was, of course, some deviltry among cherry trees and apple orchards—some lawlessness born of sheer exuberance and superb health—some malicious trespassing, some harrying of unpopular neighbours. But not very much, considering.

Her home life was colourless, calm, comfortable, and uneventful as she regarded it. Business at the Hotel Greensleeve had fallen off and in reality the children had very little. But children at that age who live all day in the open, require little except sympathetic intelligence for their million daily questions.

This the Greensleeve children found wanting except when their mother did her best to stimulate her own latent intelligence for their sakes.

But it rested on the foundation of an old-fashioned and limited education. Only the polite, simpler, and more maidenly arts had been taught her in the little New Jersey school her father had kept. And her education ceased when she married Greensleeve, the ex-"professor" of penmanship, a kind, gentle, unimaginative man, unusually dull even for a teacher. And he was a failure even at that.

They began married life by buying the house they were now living in; and when Greensleeve also failed as a farmer, they opened the place as a public tavern, and took in Ledlie to finance it.

So it was to her mother that Athalie went for any information that her ardent and growing intellect required. And her mother, intuitively surmising the mind-hunger of youth, and its vigorous needs, did her limited best to satisfy it in her children. And that is really all the education they had; for what they got in the country school amounted to—well it amounted to what anybody ever gets in school.

Her most enduring, most vivid memories of her mother clustered around those summer days of her twelfth year,

brief lamp-lit scenes between long, sunlit hours of healthy, youthful madness—quiet moments when she came in flushed and panting from the headlong chase after pleasure, tired, physically satisfied, to sit on the faded carpet at her mother's feet and clasp her hands over her mother's knees.

Then "what?" and "why?" and "when?" and "how?" were the burden of the child's eager speech. Nothing seemed to have escaped her quick ears or eyes, no natural phenomena of the open; life, birth, movement, growth, the flow, and ebb of tides, thunder pealing from high-piled clouds, the sun shining through fragrant falling rain, mists that grew over swamp and meadow.

And, "Why?" she always asked.

Nothing escaped her;—swallows skimming and sheering Spring Pond, trout that jumped at sunset, the quick furry shapes of mink and muskrat, the rattling flash of a blue-winged kingfisher, a tall heron wading, a gull mewing.

Nothing escaped her; the casual caress of mating birds, procreation in farm-yard and barn-yard, fledgelings crying from a robin's nest of mud and messy refuse, blind kittens tugging at their blinking mother.

Death, too, she saw,—a dusty heap of feathers here, a little mound of fur, there, which the idle breezes stirred under the high sky,—and once a dead dog, battered, filthy and bloody, shot by the roadside; and once some pigs being killed on a farm, all screaming.

Then, in that school as in every school, there was the sinister minority, always huddling in corners, full of mean silences and furtive leering. And their half-heard words, half-understood phrases,—a gesture, a look that silenced and

perplexed her—these the child brought also to her mother, sitting at her feet, face against her knees.

For a month or two her mother had not been very well, and the doctor who had brought Athalie into the world stopped in once or twice a week. When he was with her mother the children were forbidden the room.

One evening in particular Athalie remembered. She had been running her legs off playing hounds-and-hares across country from the salt-hay stacks to the chestnut ridge, and she had come in after sunset to find her mother sewing in her own bedroom, her brother and sisters studying their lessons in the sitting-room where her father also sat reading the local evening paper.

Supper was over, but Athalie went to the kitchen and presently returned to her mother's room carrying a bowl of bread and milk and half a pie.

Here on the faded carpet at her mother's feet, full in the lamplight she sat her down and ate in hungry silence while her mother sewed.

Athalie seldom studied. A glance at her books seemed to be enough for her. And she passed examinations without effort under circumstances where plodders would have courted disaster.

Rare questions from her mother, brief replies marked the meal. When she had satisfied her hunger she jumped up, ran downstairs with the empty dishes, and came slowly back again,—a slender, supple figure with tangled hair curling below her shoulders, dirty shirt-waist, soiled features

and hands, and the ragged blue skirt of a sailor suit hanging to her knees.

"Your other sailor suit is washed and mended," said her mother, smiling at her child in tatters.

Athalie, her gaze remote, nodded absently. After a moment she lifted her steady dark blue eyes:

"A boy kissed me, mamma," she remarked, dropping cross-legged at her mother's feet.

"Don't kiss strange boys," said her mother quietly.

"I didn't. But why not?"

"It is not considered proper."

"Why?"

Her mother said: "Kissing is a common and vulgar practice except in the intimacy of one's own family."

"I thought so," nodded Athalie; "I soaked him for doing it."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, it was that fresh Harry Eldon. I told him if he ever tried to get fresh with me again I'd kill him.... Mamma?"

"Yes?"

"All that about poor old Mr. Manners isn't true, is it?"

Her mother smiled. The children had been taught to leave a morsel on their plates "for manners"; and to impress it upon them their mother had invented a story about a poor old man named Manners who depended upon what they left, and who crept in to eat it after they had retired from table.

So leaving something "for Manners" had been thoroughly and successfully inculcated, until the habit was formed. And

now Athalie was the last of the children to discover the gentle fraud practised upon her.

"I'm glad, anyway," concluded the child. "I never thought we left him enough to eat."

Her mother said: "I shall tell you only truths after this. You are old enough to understand reason, now, and to reason a little yourself."

"I do.... But I am not yet perfectly sure where babies come from. You said you would tell me *that* some day. I'd really like to know, mamma."

Her mother continued to sew for a while, then, passing the needle through the hem she looked down at her daughter.

"Have you formed any opinion of your own?"

"Yes," said the child honestly.

"Then I'd better tell you the truth," said her mother tranquilly, "because the truth is very wonderful and beautiful—and interesting."

So she related to the child, very simply and clearly all that need be told concerning the mystery of life in its beginnings; and Athalie listened, enchanted.

And mostly it thrilled the child to realise that in her, too, lay latent a capability for the creation of life.

Another hour with her mother she remembered in after years.

Mrs. Greensleeve had not been as well: the doctor came oftener. Frequently Athalie returning from school discovered her mother lying on the bed. That evening the child was sitting on the floor at her mother's feet as usual, just inside

the circle of lamplight, playing solitaire with an ancient pack of cards.

Presently something near the door attracted her attention and she lifted her head and sat looking at it, mildly interested, until, suddenly, she felt her mother's eyes on her, flushed hotly, and turned her head away.

"*What* were you looking at?" asked her mother in a low voice.

"Nothing, mamma."

"Athalie!"

"What, mamma?"

"*What* were you looking at?"

The child hung her head: "Nothing—" she began; but her mother checked her: "Don't lie, Athalie. I'll try to understand you. Now tell me what you were—what you thought you were looking at over there near the door."

The child turned and glanced back at the door over her shoulder.

"There is nothing there—now," she muttered.

"Was there anything?"

Athalie sat silent for a while, then she laid her clasped hands across her mother's knees and rested her cheek on them.

"There was a woman there," she said.

"Where?"

"Over by the door."

"You saw her, Athalie?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Did she open the door and come in and then close it behind her?"

"No."

"How did she come in?"

"I don't know. She—just came in."

"Was she a young woman?"

"No, old."

"Very old?"

"Not very. There was grey in her hair—a little."

"How was she dressed?"

"She wore a night-gown, mamma. There were spots on it—like medicine."

"Had you ever seen her before?"

"I think so."

"Who was she?"

"Mrs. Allen."

Her mother sat very still but her clasped hands tightened and a little of the colour faded from her cheeks. There was a Mrs. Allen who had been suffering from an illness which she herself was afraid she had.

"Do you mean Mrs. James Allen who lives on the old Allen farm?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, mamma."

In the morning they heard of Mrs. Allen's death. And it was several months before Mrs. Greensleeve again spoke to her daughter on the one subject about which Athalie was inclined to be most reticent. But that subject now held a deadly fascination for her mother.

They had been sitting together in Mrs. Greensleeve's bedroom; the mother knitting, in bed propped up upon the pillows. Athalie, cross-legged on a hassock beside her, was

doing a little mending on her own account, when her mother said abruptly but very quietly:

"I have always known that you possess a power—which others cannot understand."

The child's face flushed deeply and she bent closer over her mending.

"I knew it when they first brought you to me, a baby just born.... I don't know how I knew it, but I did."

Athalie, sewing steadily, said nothing.

"I think," said her mother, "you are, in some degree, what is called clairvoyant."

"What?"

"Clairvoyant," repeated her mother quietly. "It comes from the French, *clair*, clear; the verb *voir*, to see; *clair-voyant*, seeing clearly. That is all, Athalie.... Nothing to be ashamed of—if it is true,—" for the child had dropped her work and had hidden her face in her hands.

"Dear, are you afraid to talk about it to your mother?"

"N-no. What is there to say about it?"

"Nothing very much. Perhaps the less said the better.... I don't know, little daughter. I don't understand it—comprehend it. If it's so, it's so.... I see you sometimes looking at things I cannot see; I know sometimes you hear sounds which I cannot hear.... Things happen which perplex the rest of us; and, somehow I seem to know that they do not perplex you. What to us seems unnatural to you is natural, even a commonplace matter of course."

"That's it, mamma. I have never seen anything that did not seem quite natural to me."

"Did you know that Mrs. Allen had died when you—thought you saw her?"

"I did see her."

"Yes.... Did you know she had died?"

"Not until I saw her."

"Did you know it then?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know how I knew it. I seemed to know it."

"Did you know she had been ill?"

"No, mamma."

"Did it in any way frighten you—make you uneasy when you saw her standing there?"

"Why, no," said Athalie, surprised.

"Not even when you knew she was dead?"

"No. Why should it? Why should I be afraid?"

Her mother was silent.

"Why?" asked Athalie, curiously. "Is there anything to be afraid of with God and all his angels watching us? Is there?"

"No."

"Then," said the child with some slight impatience, "why is it that other people seem to be a little afraid of me and of what they say I can hear and see? I have good eyesight; I see clearly; that is all, isn't it? And there is nothing to frighten anybody in seeing clearly, is there?"

"No, dear."

"People make me so cross," continued Athalie,—"and so ashamed when they ask so many questions. What is there to be surprised at if sometimes I see things *inside* my mind.

They are just as real as when I see them *outside*. They are no different."

Her mother nodded, encouragingly.

"When papa was in New York," went on Athalie, "and I saw him talking to some men in a hotel there, why should it be surprising just because papa was in New York and I was here when I saw him?"

"It surprises others, dear, because they cannot see what is beyond the vision of their physical senses."

Athalie said: "They tease me in school because they say I can see around corners. It makes me very cross and unhappy, and I don't want anybody to know that I see what they can't see. I'm ashamed to have them know it."

"Perhaps it is just as well you feel that way. People are odd. What they do not understand they ridicule. A dog that would not notice a horse-drawn vehicle will bark at an automobile."

"Mamma?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you know that dogs, and I think cats, too, see many things that I do; and that other people do not see."

"Why do you think so?"

"I have noticed it.... The other evening when the white cat was dozing on your bed, and I was down here on the floor, sewing, I saw—something. And the cat looked up suddenly and saw it, too."

"Athalie!"

"She did, mamma. I knew perfectly well that she saw what I saw."

"What was it you saw?"

"Only a young man. He walked over to the window—"

"And then?"

"I don't know, mamma. I don't know where they go. They go, that's all I know."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know."

"Did he look at us?"

"Yes.... He seemed to be thinking of something pleasant."

"Did he smile?"

"He—had a pleasant look.... And once,—it was last Sunday—over by the bed I saw a little boy. He was kneeling down beside the bed. And Mr. Ledlie's dog was lying here beside me.... Don't you remember how he suddenly lifted his head and barked?"

"Yes, I remember. But you didn't tell me why at the time."

"I didn't like to.... I never like to speak about these—people—I see."

"Had you ever before seen the little boy?"

"No, mamma."

"Was he—alive—do you think?"

"Why, yes. They all are alive."

"Mrs. Allen was not alive when you saw her over by the door."

The child looked puzzled. "Yes," she said, "but that was a little different. Not *very* different. They are all perfectly alive, mamma."

"Even the ones we call dead? Are you sure of it?"

"Yes.... Yes, I'm sure of it. They are not dead.... Nothing seems to die. Nothing stays dead."

"What! Why do you believe that?"

Athalie said slowly: "Somebody shot and killed a poor little dog, once,—just across the causeway bridge.... And the dog came into the garden afterward and ran all around, smelling, and wagging his tail."

"Athalie! Athalie! Be careful to control your imagination."

"Yes," said the child, thoughtfully, "I must be careful to control it. I can imagine almost anything if I try."

"How hard have you ever tried to imagine some of the things you see—or think you see?"

"Mamma, I never try. I—I don't care to see them. I'd rather not. Those things come. *I* haven't anything to do with it. I don't know these people, and I am not interested. I *did* try to see papa in New York—if you call that imagination."

But her mother did not know what to call it because at the hour when Athalie had seen him, that mild and utterly unimaginative man was actually saying and doing what his daughter had seen and heard.

"Also," said Athalie, "I *was* thinking about that poor little yellow dog and wondering whether he was past all suffering, when he came gaily trotting into the garden, waving his tail quite happily. There was no dust or blood on him. He rolled on the grass, too, and barked and barked. But nobody seemed to hear him or notice him excepting I."

For a long while silence reigned in the lamp-lit room. When the other children came in to say good night to their mother she received them with an unusual tenderness. They went away; Athalie rose, yawning the yawn of healthy fatigue:

"Good night, mamma."

"Good night, little daughter."

They kissed: the mother drew her into a sudden and almost convulsive embrace.

"Darling, are you sure that nothing really dies?"

"*I* have never seen anything really dead, mamma. Even the 'dead' birds,—why, the evening sky is full of them—the little 'dead' ones I mean—flock after flock, twittering and singing—"

"Dear!"

"Yes, mamma."

"When you see me—*that* way—will you—speak?"

"Yes."

"Promise, darling."

"Yes.... I'll kiss you, too—if it is possible...."

"Would it be possible?"

The child gazed at her, perplexed and troubled: "I—don't—know," she said slowly. Then, all in a moment her childish face paled and she clung to her mother and began to cry.

And her mother soothed her, tenderly, smilingly, kissing the tears from the child's eyes.

The next morning after the children had gone to school Mrs. Greensleeve was operated on—without success.

CHAPTER III

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THE black dresses of the children had become very rusty by spring, but business had been bad at the Hotel Greensleeve, and Athalie, Doris, and Catharine continued to wear their shabby mourning.

Greensleeve haunted the house all day long, roaming from bar to office, from one room to another, silently opening doors of unoccupied chambers to peer about in the dusty obscurity, then noiselessly closing them, he would slink away down the dim corridor to his late wife's room and sit there through the long sunny afternoon, his weak face buried in his hands.

Ledlie had grown fatter, redder of visage, whiter of hair and beard. When a rare guest arrived, or when local loafers wandered into the bar with the faint stench of fertilizer clinging to their boots, he shuffled ponderously from office to bar, serving as economically as he dared whoever desired to be served.

Always a sprig of something green protruded from his small tight mouth. His pale eyes, now faded almost colourless, had become weak and red-rimmed, and he blinked continually except in the stale semi-darkness of the house.

Always, now, he was muttering and grumbling his disapproval of the children—"Eatin' their heads off I tell you, Pete! What good is all this here schoolin' doin' 'em when they ought to git out some'rs an' earn their vittles?"

But if Greensleeve's attitude was one of passive acquiescence, he made no effort to withdraw the children from school. Once, when life was younger, and Jack, his first baby, came, he had dreamed of college for him, and of a career—in letters perhaps—something dignified, leisurely, profound beyond his own limits. And of a modest corner somewhere within the lustre of his son's environment where he and his wife, grey-haired, might dream and admire, finding there surcease from care and perhaps the peace which passes all understanding.

The ex-"professor" of penmanship had been always prone to dream. No dull and sordid reality, no hopeless sorrow had yet awakened him. Nor had his wife's death been more real than the half-strangled anguish of a dreamer, tossing in darkness. As for the children, they paid no more attention to Ledlie than they might have to a querulous but superannuated dog.

Jack, now fifteen, still dawdled at school, where his record was not good. Perhaps it was partly because he had no spending money, no clothing to maintain his boyish self-respect, no prospects of any sort, that he had become sullen, uncommunicative, and almost loutish.

Nobody governed him; his father was unqualified to control anybody or anything; his mother was dead.

With her death went the last vestige of any tie that had held the boy to the home anchorage—of any feeling of responsibility concerning the conduct expected and required of him.

He shirked his studies, came home only to eat and sleep, remained out late without explanation or any home

interference, except for the constant disputes and quarrels with Doris and Catharine, now aged respectively fourteen and thirteen.

To Athalie he had little to say. Perhaps he did not realise it but he was slightly afraid of her. And it was from her that he took any pains at all to conceal his irregularities.

Once, coming in from school, she had found the house deserted, and Jack smelling of alcohol just slouching out of the bar.

"If you do that again I shall tell father," she said, horrified.

"What do I care!" he had retorted sullenly. And it was true; the boy no longer cared what anybody might think as long as Athalie already knew and detested what he had done.

There was a garage in the neighbouring village. He spent most of his time hanging around it. Sometimes he came home reeking of oil and gasoline, sometimes his breath was tainted with tobacco and alcohol.

He was so much bigger and older than Athalie that the child had never entirely lost her awe of him. His weakness of character, his failings, and the fact that he was a trifle afraid of her opinion, combined to astonish and bewilder her.

For a long while she tried to understand the gradual but certain reversal of their relations. And one night, still more or less in awe of him, she got out of bed and went softly into his room.

He was not asleep. The sudden apparition of his youngest sister considerably startled him, and he sat up in