

***MAY
SINCLAIR***

***THE TREE
OF HEAVEN***

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The Tree of Heaven

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PART I

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PEACE

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I

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Frances Harrison was sitting out in the garden under the tree that her husband called an ash-tree, and that the people down in her part of the country called a tree of Heaven.

It was warm under the tree, and Frances might have gone to sleep there and wasted an hour out of the afternoon, if it hadn't been for the children.

Dorothy, Michael and Nicholas were going to a party, and Nicky was excited. She could hear Old Nanna talking to Michael and telling him to be a good boy. She could hear young Mary-Nanna singing to Baby John. Baby John was too young himself to go to parties; so to make up for that he was riding furiously on Mary-Nanna's knee to the tune of the "Bumpetty-Bumpetty Major!"

It was Nicky's first party. That was why he was excited.

He had asked her for the third time what it would be like; and for the third time she had told him. There would be dancing and a Magic Lantern, and a Funny Man, and a Big White Cake covered with sugar icing and Rosalind's name on it in pink sugar letters and eight little pink wax candles burning on the top for Rosalind's birthday. Nicky's eyes shone as she told him.

Dorothy, who was nine years old, laughed at Nicky.

"Look at Nicky," she said, "how excited he is!"

And every time she laughed at him his mother kissed him.

"I don't care," said Nicky. "I don't care if I am excited!"

And for the fifth time he asked, "When will it be time to go?"

"Not for another hour and a half, my sweetheart."

"How long," said Nicky, "is an hour and a half?"

Frances had a tranquil nature and she never worried. But as she sat under her tree of Heaven a thought came that made a faint illusion of worry for her mind. She had forgotten to ask Grannie and Auntie Louie and Auntie Emmeline and Auntie Edie to tea.

She had come to think of them like that in relation to her children rather than to her or to each other.

It was a Tuesday, and they had not been there since Friday. Perhaps, she thought, I'd better send over for them now. Especially as it's such a beautiful afternoon. Supposing I sent Michael?

And yet, supposing Anthony came home early? He was always kind to her people, but that was the very reason why she oughtn't to let them spoil a beautiful afternoon for him. It could not be said that any of them was amusing.

She could still hear Mary-Nanna singing her song about the Bumpetty-Bumpetty Major. She could still hear Old Nanna talking to Michael and telling him to be a good boy. That could only end in Michael being naughty. To avert naughtiness or any other disaster from her children was the end of Frances's existence.

So she called Michael to come to her. He came, running like a little dog, obediently.

Michael was glad that he had been sent across the Heath to Grannie's house with a message. It made him feel big and brave. Besides, it would put off the moment when Mary-Nanna would come for him, to make him ready for the party. He was not sure that he wanted to go to it.

Michael did not much like going to Grannie's house either. In all the rooms there was a queer dark-greenness and creepiness. It smelt of bird-cages and elder bushes and of Grandpapa's funeral. And when you had seen Auntie Edie's Senegal wax-bills, and the stuffed fish, and the inside of Auntie Louie's type-writer there was nothing else to see.

His mother said that Grandpapa's funeral was all over, and that the green creepiness came from the green creepers. But Michael knew it didn't. She only said things like that to make you feel nice and comfy when you were going to bed. Michael knew very well that they had put Grandpapa into the drawing-room and locked the door so

that the funeral men shouldn't get at him and take him away too soon. And Auntie Louie had kept the key in her pocket.

Funerals meant taking people away.

Old Nanna wouldn't let him talk about it; but Mary-Nanna had told him that was what funerals meant. All the same, as he went up the flagged path, he took care not to look through the black panes of the window where the elder bush was, lest he should see Grandpapa's coffin standing in the place where the big table used to be, and Grandpapa lying inside it wrapped in a white sheet.

Michael's message was that Mummy sent her love, and would Grannie and Auntie Louie and Auntie Emmeline and Auntie Edie come to tea? She was going to have tea in the garden, and would they please come early? As early as possible. That was the part he was not to forget.

The queer thing was that when Michael went to see Grannie and the Aunties in Grannie's house he saw four old women. They wore black dresses that smelt sometimes of something sweet and sometimes like your fingers when you get ink on them. The Aunties looked cross; and Auntie Emmeline smelt as if she had been crying. He thought that perhaps they had not been able to stop crying since Grandpapa's funeral. He thought that was why Auntie Louie's nose was red and shiny and Auntie Edie's eyelids had pink edges instead of lashes. In Grannie's house they never let you do anything. They never did anything themselves. They never wanted to do anything; not even to talk. He thought it was because they knew that Grandpapa was still there all the time.

But outside it the Aunties were not so very old. They rode bicycles. And when they came to Michael's Father's house they forgot all about Grandpapa's funeral and ran about and played tennis like Michael's mother and Mrs. Jervis, and they talked a lot.

Michael's mother was Grannie's child. To see how she could be a child you had only to think of her in her nightgown with her long brown hair plaited in a pigtail hanging down her back and tied with a blue ribbon. But he couldn't see how the three Aunties could be Grannie's other children. They were bigger than Grannie and they had grey hair. Grannie was a little thing; she was white and dry; and she had hair like hay. Besides, she hardly ever took any notice of them except to make a face at Auntie Emmeline or Auntie Edie now and then. She did it with her head a little on one side, pushing out her underlip and drawing it back again.

Grannie interested Michael; but more when he thought about her than when she was actually there. She stood for him as the mark and measure of past time. To understand how old Grannie was you had to think backwards; this way: Once there was a time when there was no Michael; but there was Mummy and there was Daddy. And once there was a time when there was no Mummy and no Daddy; but there was Grannie and there was Grandpapa. Now there was no Grandpapa. But he couldn't think back far enough to get to the time when there was no Grannie.

Michael thought that being Grannie must feel like being God.

Before he came to the black window pane and the elder bush he had to run down the slopes and jump the gullies on his side of the Heath, and cross the West Road, and climb the other slope to Grannie's side. And it was not till you got to the row of elms on Judge's Walk that you had to go carefully because of the funeral.

He stood there on the ridge of the Walk and looked back to his own side. There were other houses there; but he knew his father's house by the tree of Heaven in the garden.

The garden stood on a high, flat promontory jutting out into the Heath. A brown brick wall with buttresses, strong like fortifications on a breastwork, enclosed it on three sides. From the flagged terrace at the bottom of the garden you looked down, through the tops of the birch-trees that rose against the rampart, over the wild places of the Heath. There was another flagged terrace at the other end of the garden. The house rose sheer from its pavement, brown brick like the wall, and flat-fronted, with the white wings of its storm shutters spread open, row on row. It barred the promontory from the mainland. And at the back of it, beyond its kitchen garden and its courtyard, a fringe of Heath still parted it from the hill road that went from "Jack Straw's Castle" to "The Bull and Bush." You reached it by a lane that led from the road to the Heath.

The house belonged to the Heath and the open country. It was aware of nothing but the Heath and the open country between it and Harrow on the Hill. It had the air of all the old houses of Hampstead, the wonderful air of not

acknowledging the existence of Bank Holidays. It was lifted up high above the town; shut in; utterly secluded.

Anthony Harrison considered that he had done well when he acquired West End House for his wife Frances, and for his children, Dorothea, Michael, Nicholas and John.

Frances had said that, if he was thinking of her, he needn't buy a big place, because she didn't want one. But he might buy it for the children if he liked. Anthony had said that she had no idea of what she mightn't want, once she began to give her mind to it, and that he would like to think of her living in it after he was gone. Not that he had any intention of going; he was only thirty-six (not much older than Frances) and incurably healthy. But since his wife's attention had become absorbed in the children--to the exclusion of every other interest--he was always trying to harrow her by the suggestion. And Frances only laughed at him and told him that he was a silly old thing, and that he needn't think he was going to get round her that way.

There was no other way open for Anthony; unless he were to go bankrupt or get pneumonia or peritonitis. Frances would have been the first to acknowledge that illness or misfortune constituted a claim. And the only things he ever did get were loud, explosive colds in his head which made him a mark for derision. His business was so sound that not even a revolution or a European war could shake it. And his appearance was incompatible with his pretensions to pathos.

It would have paid him better to have been small and weedy, or lamentably fat, or to have had a bald place

coming, or crow's feet pointing to grey hairs; for then there might have been a chance for him. But Anthony's body was well made, slender and tall. He had blue eyes and black-brown hair, and the look of an amiable hawk, alert, fiercely benevolent. Frances couldn't see any pathos in the kind of figure she happened to admire most, the only kind she would have tolerated in a husband. And if she *had* seen any pathos in it she wouldn't have married it. Pathos, she said, was all very well in a father, or a brother, or a friend, but in choosing a husband you had to think of your children; and she had wanted boys that would look like Michael and Nicholas and John.

"Don't you mean," Anthony had said, "boys that will look like me?"

"I mean," she had answered, "exactly what I say. You needn't be so arrogant."

Her arrogance had been beyond all bearing since John, the third son, had been born.

And it was Frances, after all, who had made him buy West End House for her own reasons. Both the day nursery and the night nursery had windows to the south. It was the kind of house she had always dreamed of living in, and of Michael, or Nicky living in after she and Anthony were gone. It was not more than seven minutes' walk from the bottom of the lane to the house where her people lived. She had to think about the old people when the poor dears had come up to London in order to be thought about. And it had white storm shutters and a tree of Heaven in the garden.

And, because they had both decided that they would have that house whatever happened, they began to argue

and to tease each other. Anthony had said it was all right, only the tree of Heaven wasn't a tree of Heaven; it was a common ash. He was one of the biggest timber merchants in the country and he ought to know. Frances said she mightn't know much, but she did know that was the kind of tree the people down in her part of the country called a tree of Heaven. Anthony said he couldn't help that. It didn't matter what they called it. It was a common ash.

Then she told him he had no poetry in his composition. She had always dreamed of having a tree of Heaven in her garden; and he was destroying her dream. He replied that he didn't want to destroy her dream, but the tree really *was* an ash. You could tell by the bark, and by the leaves and by the number and the shape of the leaflets. And anyhow, that was the first he'd heard about her dream.

"You don't know," said Frances, "what goes on inside me."

She said that if any of the children developed an imagination he needn't think *he* had anything to do with it.

"I shan't," said Anthony. "I wouldn't have anything to do with it if I could. Facts are good enough for me. The children must be brought up to realize facts."

An ash-tree was a fact and a tree of Heaven was a fancy; unless by any chance she meant *ailanthus glandulosa*. (He knew she didn't.) If she wanted to know, the buds of the ash were black like ebony. The buds of the tree of Heaven were rose-red, like--like bad mahogany. Wait till the spring and look at the buds.

Frances waited till the spring and looked at the buds, and, sure enough, they were black like ebony.

Anthony also said that if they were choosing a house for the children, it was no earthly use to think about the old people. For the old people would go and the children would remain.

As if to show how right he was, Grandpapa had died early in that summer of 'ninety-five, one month after they had moved into West End House. That still left Grannie and Auntie Louie and Auntie Emmeline and Auntie Edie for Anthony to look after.

She was thinking of them now. She hoped that they would come early in time to see the children. She also hoped that they would go early, so that she and Anthony might have their three sets of tennis before dinner in peace.

There would be no peace if Louie and Edie wanted to play too. The one thing that Anthony could not stand was people wanting to do things they couldn't do, and spoiling them for those who could. He used to say that the sight of Louie anywhere near the tennis court put him off his stroke.

Again, the faint illusion of worry was created by the thought that this dreadful thing might happen, that Louie and Edie might want to play and that Anthony would be put off his stroke and be annoyed, and that his annoyance, his just and legitimate annoyance, would spoil the perfection of the afternoon. And as she played with the illusion it made more real her tranquillity, her incredible content.

Her hands were busy now putting decorative stitches into a frock for John. She had pushed aside a novel by George Moore and a volume of Ibsen's plays. She disliked Ibsen and disapproved of George Moore. Her firm, tight little character

defended itself against every form of intellectual disturbance. A copy of the *Times* had fallen from her lap to her feet. Jane, the cat, had found it there, and, purring loudly, had trodden it down into a bed, and now lay on it, asleep. Frances had informed herself of the affairs of the nation.

At the bottom of her mind was the conviction (profound, because unconscious) that the affairs of the nation were not to be compared for interest with her own affairs, and an attitude of condescension, as if she honoured the *Times* by reading it and the nation by informing herself of its affairs; also the very distinct impression that evening papers were more attractive than morning papers. She would have admitted that they owed their attraction to the circumstance that Anthony brought them home with him in his pocket, and that in the evening she was not obliged to inform herself of what might be happening. Anthony was certain to inform her.

Not that anything ever did happen. Except strikes; and even then, no sooner did the features of the strike begin to get dramatic than they were instantly submerged in the flood of conversation that was let loose over them. Mrs. Anthony pitied the poor editors and reporters while Parliament was sitting. She saw them as rather silly, violent and desperate men, yet pathetic in their silliness, violence and desperation, snatching at divorces, and breach of promise cases, and fires in paraffin shops, as drowning men snatch at straws.

Her imagination refused to picture any end to this state of things. There would just be more speeches and more

strikes, and still more speeches, going on for ever and ever at home; while foreign affairs and the British Empire went on for ever and ever too, with no connection between the two lines of sequence, and no likeness, except that both somehow went on and on.

That was Anthony's view of England's parliament and of her imperial policy; and it was Mrs. Anthony's. Politics, Anthony said, had become static; and he assured Frances that there was no likelihood that they would ever become dynamic again--ever.

Anthony's view of politics was Mrs. Anthony's view of life.

Nothing ever really happened. Things did not change; they endured; they went on. At least everything that really mattered endured and went on. So that everything that really mattered could--if you were given to looking forward--be foreseen. A strike--a really bad one--might conceivably affect Anthony's business, for a time; but not all the strikes in the world, not all the silly speeches, not all the meddling and muddling of politicians could ever touch one of those enduring things.

Frances believed in permanence because, in secret, she abhorred the thought of change. And she abhorred the thought of change because, at thirty-three, she had got all the things she wanted. But only for the last ten years out of the thirty-three. Before that (before she was Mrs. Anthony), wanting things, letting it be known that you wanted them, had meant not getting them. So that it was incredible how she had contrived to get them all. She had not yet left off being surprised at her own happiness. It was not like things you take for granted and are not aware of. Frances was

profoundly aware of it. Her happiness was a solid, tangible thing. She knew where it resided, and what it was made of, and what terms she held it on. It depended on her; on her truth, her love, her loyalty; it was of the nature of a trust. But there was no illusion about it. It was the reality.

She denied that she was arrogant, for she had not taken one of them for granted, not even Dorothy; though a little arrogance might have been excusable in a woman who had borne three sons and only one daughter before she was thirty-two. Whereas Grannie's achievement had been four daughters, four superfluous women, of whom Anthony had married one and supported three.

To be sure there was Maurice. But he was worse than superfluous, considering that most of the time Anthony was supporting Maurice, too.

She had only known one serious anxiety--lest her flesh and blood should harbour any of the blood and flesh left over after Morrie was made. She had married Anthony to drive out Morrie from the bodies and souls of her children. She meant that, through her and Anthony, Morrie should go, and Dorothea, Michael, Nicholas and John should remain.

As Frances looked at the four children, her mouth tightened itself so as to undo the ruinous adoration of her eyes. She loved their slender bodies, their pure, candid faces, their thick, straight hair that parted solidly from the brush, clean-cut and shining like sheets of polished metal, brown for Dorothy, black-brown for Nicholas, red gold for Michael and white gold for John. She was glad that they were all made like that; slender and clear and hard, and that their very hair was a thing of clean surfaces and definite

edges. She disliked the blurred outlines of fatness and fuzziness and fluffiness. The bright solidity of their forms helped her to her adored illusion, the illusion of their childhood as going on, lasting for ever and ever.

They would be the nicest looking children at Mrs. Jervis's party. They would stand out solid from the fluffiness and fuzziness and fatness of the others. She saw people looking at them. She heard them saying: "Who are the two little boys in brown linen?"--"They are Michael and Nicholas Harrison." The Funny Man came and said: "Hello! I didn't expect to see you here!" It was Michael and Nicholas he didn't expect to see; and the noise in the room was Nicky's darling laughter.

Music played. Michael and Nicholas danced to the music. It was Michael's body and Nicky's that kept for her the pattern of the dance, their feet that beat out its measure. Sitting under the tree of Heaven Frances could see Mrs. Jervis's party. It shimmered and clustered in a visionary space between the tree and the border of blue larkspurs on the other side of the lawn. The firm figures of Michael and Nicholas and Dorothy held it together, kept it from being shattered amongst the steep blue spires of the larkspurs. When it was all over they would still hold it together, so that people would know that it had really happened and remember having been there. They might even remember that Rosalind had had a birthday.

Frances had just bestowed this life after death on Mrs. Jervis's party when she heard Michael saying he didn't want to go to it.

He had no idea why he didn't want to go except that he didn't.

"What'?" said Frances. "Not when Nicky and Dorothy are going?"

He shook his head. He was mournful and serious.

"And there's going to be a Magic Lantern"--

"I know."

"And a Funny Man"--

"I know."

"And a Big White Cake with sugar icing and Rosalind's name on it in pink letters, and eight candles--"

"I know, Mummy." Michael's under lip began to shake.

"I thought it was only little baby boys that were silly and shy."

Michael was not prepared to contest the statement. He saw it was the sort of thing that in the circumstances she was bound to say. All the same his under lip would have gone on shaking if he hadn't stopped it.

"I thought you were a big boy," said Frances.

"So I *was*, yesterday. To-day isn't yesterday, Mummy."

"If John--John was asked to a beautiful party *he* wouldn't be afraid to go."

As soon as Michael's under lip had stopped shaking his eyelids began. You couldn't stop your eyelids.

"It's not *afraid*, exactly," he said.

"What is it, then?"

"It's sort--sort of forgetting things."

"What things?"

"I don't know, Mummy. I think--it's pieces of me that I want to remember. At a party I can't feel all of myself at

once--like I do now."

She loved his strange thoughts as she loved his strange beauty, his reddish yellow hair, his light hazel eyes that were not hers and not Anthony's.

"What will you do, sweetheart, all afternoon, without Nicky and Dorothy and Mary-Nanna?"

"I don't want Nicky and Dorothy and Mary-Nanna. I want Myself. I want to play with Myself."

She thought: "Why shouldn't he? What right have I to say these things to him and make him cry, and send him to stupid parties that he doesn't want to go to? After all, he's only a little boy."

She thought of Michael, who was seven, as if he were younger than Nicholas, who was only five.

Nicky was different. You could never tell what Michael would take it into his head to think. You could never tell what Nicky would take it into his head to do. There was no guile in Michael. But sometimes there was guile in Nicky. Frances was always on the look out for Nicky's guile.

So when Michael remarked that Grannie and the Aunties would be there immediately and Nicky said, "Mummy, I think my ear is going to ache," her answer was--"You won't have to stay more than a minute, darling."

For Nicky lived in perpetual fear that his Auntie Louie might kiss at him.

Dorothy saw her mother's profound misapprehension and she hastened to put it right.

"It isn't Auntie Louie, Mummy. His ear is really aching."

And still Frances went on smiling. She knew, and Nicky knew that, if a little boy could establish the fact of earache, he was absolved from all social and family obligations for as long as his affliction lasted. He wouldn't have to stand still and pretend he liked it while he was being kissed at.

Frances kept her mouth shut when she smiled, as if she were trying not to. It was her upper lip that got the better of her. The fine, thin edges of it quivered and twitched and curled. You would have said the very down was sensitive to her thought's secret and iniquitous play. Her smile mocked other people's solemnities, her husband's solemnity, and the solemnity (no doubt inherited) of her son Michael; it mocked the demureness and the gravity of her face.

She had brought her face close to Nicky's; and it was as if her mouth had eyes in it to see if there were guile in him.

"Are you a little humbug?" she said.

Nicky loved his mother's face. It never got excited or did silly things like other people's faces. It never got red and shiny like Auntie Louie's face, or hot and rough like Auntie Emmeline's, or wet and mizzly like Auntie Edie's. The softness and whiteness and dryness of his mother's face were delightful to Nicky. So was her hair. It was cold, with a funny sort of coldness that made your fingers tingle when you touched it; and it smelt like the taste of Brazil nuts.

Frances saw the likeness of her smile quiver on Nicky's upper lip. It broke and became Nicky's smile that bared his little teeth and curled up the corners of his blue eyes. (His blue eyes and black brown hair were Anthony's.) It wasn't reasonable to suppose that Nicky had earache when he could smile like that.

"I'm afraid," she said, "you're a little humbug. Run to the terrace and see if Grannie and the Aunties are coming."

He ran. It was half a child's run and half a full-grown boy's.

Then Mrs. Anthony addressed her daughter.

"Why did you say his ear's aching when it isn't?"

"Because," said Dorothy, "it *is* aching."

She was polite and exquisite and obstinate, like Anthony.

"Nicky ought to know his own ear best. Go and tell him he's not to stand on the top of the wall. And if they're coming wave to them, to show you're glad to see them."

"But--Mummy--I'm not."

She knew it was dreadful before she said it. But she had warded off reproof by nuzzling against her mother's cheek as it tried to turn away from her. She saw her mother's upper lip moving, twitching. The sensitive down stirred on it like a dark smudge, a dust that quivered. Her own mouth, pushed forward, searching, the mouth of a nuzzling puppy, remained grave and tender. She was earnest and imperturbable in her truthfulness. "Whether you're glad or not you must go," said Frances. She meant to be obeyed.

Dorothy went. Her body was obedient. For as yet she had her mother's body and her face, her blunted oval, the straight nose with the fine, tilted nostrils, her brown eyes, her solid hair, brown on the top and light underneath, and on the curve of the roll above her little ears. Frances had watched the appearance of those details with an anxiety that would have surprised her if she had been aware of it. She wanted to see herself in the bodies of her sons and in the mind of her daughter. But Dorothy had her father's

mind. You couldn't move it. What she had said once she stuck to for ever, like Anthony to his ash-tree. As if sticking to a thing for ever could make it right once. And Dorothy had formed the habit of actually being right, like Anthony, nine times out of ten. Frances foresaw that this persistence, this unreasoning rectitude, might, in time, become annoying in a daughter. There were moments when she was almost perturbed by the presence of this small, mysterious organism, mixed up of her body and her husband's mind.

But in secret she admired her daughter's candour, her downrightness and straightforwardness, her disdain of conventions and hypocrisies. Frances was not glad, she knew she was not glad, any more than Dorothy was glad, to see her mother and her sisters. She only pretended. In secret she was afraid of every moment she would have to live with them. She had lived with them too long. She foresaw what would happen this afternoon, how they would look, what they would say and do, and with what gestures. It would be like the telling, for the thirteenth time, of a dull story that you know every word of.

She thought she had sent them a kind message. But she knew she had only asked them to come early in order that they might go early and leave her to her happiness.

She went down to the terrace wall where Michael and Nicky and Dorothy were watching for them. She was impatient, and she thought that she wanted to see them coming. But she only wanted to see if they were coming early. It struck her that this was sad.

Small and distant, the four black figures moved on the slope under the Judges' Walk; four spots of black that crawled on the fallow grass and the yellow clay of the Heath.

"How little they look," Michael said.

Their littleness and their distance made them harmless, made them pathetic. Frances was sorry that she was not glad. That was the difference between her and Dorothy, that she was sorry and always would be sorry for not being what she ought to be; and Dorothy never would be sorry for being what she was. She seemed to be saying, already, in her clearness and hardness, "What I am I am, and you can't change me." The utmost you could wring from her was that she couldn't help it.

Frances's sorrow was almost unbearable when the four women in black came nearer, when she saw them climbing the slope below the garden and the lane.



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Grannie took a long time crossing the lawn from the door in the lane to the tree of Heaven.

She came first. Her daughters followed, forced to her slow pace, advancing with an air of imperfect cohesion, of not really belonging to each other, as if they had been strangers associated by some accident. It had grown on them in their efforts to carry off the embarrassment of appearing as an eternal trio. Auntie Louie carried it off best. Sharp and rigid, Auntie Louie's figure never lent itself to any group. But for her black gown she really might not have belonged.

Mrs. Fleming went slowly, not because she was old, for she was only sixty, but because, though she said, and thought, that she was wrapped up in Frances and her children, she was still absorbed, fascinated by her sacred sense of bereavement. She moved as if hypnotized by her own sorrow.

To her three unmarried daughters she behaved with a sort of mystic hostility, a holy detachment and displeasure, as if she suspected them of getting over it, or of wanting to get over it if they could. But to her one married daughter and to her grand-children she was soft and gentle. So that, when they happened to be all together, her moods changed so rapidly that she seemed a creature of unaccountable caprice. One minute her small, white, dry face quivered with softness and gentleness, and the next it stiffened, or twitched with the inimical, disapproving look it had for Louie and Emmeline and Edith.

The children lifted up their pure, impassive faces to be kissed at. Old Nanna brought Baby John and put him on his grandmother's knee. Dorothy and Nicholas went off with Mary-Nanna to the party. Michael forgot all about playing

with himself. He stayed where he was, drawn by the spectacle of Grannie and the Aunties. Grannie was clucking and chuckling to Baby John as she had clucked and chuckled to her own babies long ago. Her under lip made itself wide and full; it worked with an in and out movement very funny and interesting to Michael. The movement meant that Grannie chuckled under protest of memories that were sacred to Grandpapa.

"Tchoo--tchoo--tchoo--tchoo! Chuckaboo! Beautiful boy!" said Grannie.

Auntie Louie looked at her youngest nephew. She smiled her downward, sagging smile, wrung from a virginity sadder than Grannie's grief. She spoke to Baby John.

"You really are rather a nice boy," Auntie Louie said.

But Edie, the youngest Auntie, was kneeling on the grass before him, bringing her face close to his. Baby John's new and flawless face was cruel to Auntie Edie's. So was his look of dignity and wisdom.

"Oh, she says you're only rather nice," said Auntie Edie. "And you're the beautifullest, sweetest, darlingest that ever was. Wasn't she a nasty Auntie Louie? Ten little pink toes. And *there* he goes. Five little tootsies to each of his footsies."

She hid herself behind the *Times* disturbing Jane.

"Where's John-John?" she cried. "Where's he gone to? Can anybody tell me where to find John-John? Where's John-John? Peep-*bo*--there he is! John-John, look at Auntie Edie. Oh, he won't pay any attention to poor me."

Baby John was playing earnestly with Grannie's watch-chain.

"You might leave the child alone," said Grannie. "Can't you see he doesn't want you?"

Auntie Edie made a little pouting face, like a scolded, pathetic child. Nobody ever did want Auntie Edie.

And all the time Auntie Emmy was talking to Frances very loud and fast.

"Frances, I do think your garden's too beautiful for words. How clever of you to think of clearing away the old flower-beds. I hate flower-beds on a lawn. Yet I don't suppose I should have had the strength of mind to get rid of them if it had been me."

As she talked Auntie Emmy opened her eyes very wide; her eyebrows jerked, the left one leaping up above the right; she thrust out her chin at you and her long, inquiring nose. Her thin face was the play of agitated nerve-strings that pulled it thus into perpetual, restless movements; and she made vague gestures with her large, bony hands. Her tongue went tick-tack, like a clock. Anthony said you-could hear Emmy's tongue striking the roof of her-mouth all the time.

"And putting those delphiniums all together like that--Massing the blues. Anthony? I *do* think Anthony has perfect taste. I adore delphiniums."

Auntie Emmy was behaving as if neither Michael nor Baby John was there.

"Don't you think John-John's too beautiful for words?" said Frances. "Don't you like him a little bit too?"

Auntie Emmy winced as if Frances had flicked something in her face.

"Of course I like him too. Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't think you *do*, Auntie Emmy," Michael said.

Auntie Emmy considered him as for the first time.

"What do you know about it?" she said.

"I can tell by the funny things your face does."

"I thought," said Frances, "you wanted to play by yourself."

"So I do," said Michael.

"Well then, go and play."

He went and to a heavenly place that he knew of. But as he played with Himself there he thought: "Auntie Emmy doesn't tell the truth. I think it is because she isn't happy."

Michael kept his best things to himself.

"I suppose you're happy," said Grannie, "now you've got the poor child sent away."

Auntie Emmy raised her eyebrows and spread out her hands, as much as to say she was helpless under her mother's stupidity.

"He'd have been sent away anyhow," said Frances. "It isn't good for him to hang about listening to grown-up conversation."

It was her part to keep the peace between her mother and her sisters.

"It seems to me," said Auntie Louie, "that you began it yourself."

When a situation became uncomfortable, Auntie Louie always put her word in and made it worse. She never would let Frances keep the peace.

Frances knew what Louie meant--that she was always flinging her babies in Emmy's face at those moments when

the sight of other people's babies was too much for Emmy. She could never be prepared for Emmy's moments.

"It's all very well," Auntie Louie went on; "but I should like to hear of somebody admiring Dorothy. I don't see where Dorothy comes in."

Dorothy was supposed, by the two Nannas, to be Auntie Louie's favourite. If you taxed her with it she was indignant and declared that she was sure she wasn't.

And again Frances knew what Louie meant--that she loved her three sons, Michael and Nicholas and John, with passion, and her one daughter, Dorothea, with critical affection. That was the sort of thing that Louie was always saying and thinking about people, and nobody ever paid the slightest attention to what Louie said or thought. Frances told herself that if there was one emotion that she was more free from than another it was sex jealousy.

The proof of it, which she offered now, was that she had given up Dorothy to Anthony. It was natural that he should care most for the little girl.

Louie said that was easy--when she knew perfectly well that Anthony didn't. Like Frances he cared most for his three sons. She was leaving Dorothy to Anthony so that Anthony might leave Michael and Nicholas to her.

"You might just as well say," Frances said, "that I'm in love with John-John. Poor little Don-Don!"

"I might," said Louie, "just as well."

Grannie said she was sure she didn't understand what they were talking about and that Louie had some very queer ideas in her head.

"Louie," she said, "knows more than I do."

Frances thought: Was Grannie really stupid? Was she really innocent? Was she not, rather, clever, chock-full of the secret wisdom and the secret cruelty of sex?

Frances was afraid of her thoughts. They came to her not like thoughts, but like quick rushes of her blood, partly confusing her. She did not like that.

She thought: Supposing Grannie knew all the time that Emmy was unhappy, and took a perverse pleasure in her knowledge? Supposing she was not really soft and gentle? She could be soft and gentle to her, because of her children and because of Anthony. She respected Anthony because he was well-off and efficient and successful, and had supported her ever since Grandpapa had gone bankrupt. She was proud of Frances because she was Anthony's wife, who had had three sons and only one daughter.

Grannie behaved as if her grandchildren were her own children, as if she had borne three Sons and only one daughter, instead of four daughters and only one son. Still, Frances was the vehicle of flesh and blood that carried on her flesh and blood in Michael and Nicholas and John. She respected Frances.

But Frances could remember a time when she had been unmarried like her sisters, and when Grannie had turned on her, too, that look that was half contempt and half hostility or displeasure. Grannie had not wanted her to marry Anthony, any more than she would have wanted Louie or Emmeline or Edith to marry anybody, supposing anybody had wanted to marry them. And Frances and Anthony had defied her. They had insisted on marrying each other. Frances knew that if there had been no Anthony, her mother