

An American Tragedy

by

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2004



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Rendered into HTML on Sunday April 11 2004, by Steve Thomas.

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BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

Dusk—of a summer night.

And the tall walls of the commercial heart of an American city of perhaps 400,000 inhabitants—such walls as in time may linger as a mere fable.

And up the broad street, now comparatively hushed, a little band of six,—a man of about fifty, short, stout, with bushy hair protruding from under a round black felt hat, a most unimportant-looking person, who carried a small portable organ such as is customarily used by street preachers and singers. And with him a woman perhaps five years his junior, taller, not so broad, but solid of frame and vigorous, very plain in face and dress, and yet not homely, leading with one hand a small boy of seven and in the other carrying a Bible and several hymn books. With these three, but walking independently behind, was a girl of fifteen, a boy of twelve and another girl of nine, all following obediently, but not too enthusiastically, in the wake of the others.

It was hot, yet with a sweet languor about it all.

Crossing at right angles the great thoroughfare on which they walked, was a second canyon-like way, threaded by throngs and vehicles and various lines of cars which clanged their bells and made such progress as they might amid swiftly moving streams of traffic. Yet the little group seemed unconscious of anything save a set purpose to make its way between the contending lines of traffic and pedestrians which flowed by them.

Having reached an intersection this side of the second principal thoroughfare—really just an alley between two tall structures—now quite bare of life of any kind, the man put down the organ, which the woman immediately opened, setting up a music rack upon which she placed a wide flat hymn book. Then handing the Bible to the man, she fell back in line with him, while the twelve-year-old boy put down a small camp-stool in front of the organ. The man—the father, as he chanced to be—looked about him with seeming wide-eyed assurance, and announced, without appearing to care whether he had any auditors or not:

“We will first sing a hymn of praise, so that any who may wish to acknowledge the Lord may join us. Will you oblige, Hester?”

At this the eldest girl, who until now had attempted to appear as unconscious and unaffected as possible, bestowed her rather slim and as yet undeveloped figure upon the camp chair and turned the leaves of the hymn book, pumping the organ while her mother observed:

“I should think it might be nice to sing twenty-seven tonight—‘How Sweet the Balm of Jesus’ Love.’”

By this time various homeward-bound individuals of diverse grades and walks of life, noticing the small group disposing itself in this fashion, hesitated for a moment to eye them askance or paused to ascertain the character of their work. This hesitancy, construed by the man apparently to constitute attention, however mobile, was seized upon by him and he began addressing them as though they were specifically here to hear him.

“Let us all sing twenty-seven, then—‘How Sweet the Balm of Jesus’ Love.’”

At this the young girl began to interpret the melody upon the organ, emitting a thin though correct strain, at the same time joining her rather high soprano with that of her mother, together with the rather dubious baritone of the father. The other children piped weakly along, the boy and girl having taken hymn books from the small pile stacked upon the organ. As they sang, this nondescript and indifferent street audience gazed, held by the peculiarity of such an unimportant-looking family publicly raising its collective voice against the vast skepticism and apathy of life. Some were interested or moved sympathetically by the rather tame and inadequate figure of the girl at the organ, others by the impractical and materially inefficient texture of the father, whose weak blue eyes and rather flabby but poorly-clothed figure bespoke more of failure than anything else. Of the group the mother alone stood out as having that force and determination which, however blind or erroneous, makes for self-preservation, if not success in life. She, more than any of the others, stood up with an ignorant, yet somehow respectable air of conviction. If you had watched her, her hymn book dropped to her side, her glance directed straight before her into space, you would have said: “Well, here is one who, whatever her defects, probably does what she believes as nearly as possible.” A kind of hard, fighting faith in the wisdom and mercy of that definite overruling and watchful power which she proclaimed, was written in her every feature and gesture.

“The love of Jesus saves me whole,
The love of God my steps control,”

she sang resonantly, if slightly nasally, between the towering walls of the adjacent buildings.

The boy moved restlessly from one foot to the other, keeping his eyes down, and for the most part only half singing. A tall and as yet slight figure, surmounted by an interesting head and face— white skin, dark hair—he seemed more keenly observant and decidedly more sensitive than most of the others—appeared indeed to resent and even to suffer from the position in which he found himself. Plainly pagan rather than religious, life interested him, although as yet he was not fully aware of this. All that could be truly said of him now was that there was no definite appeal in all this for him. He was too young, his mind much too responsive to phases of beauty and pleasure which had little, if anything, to do with the remote and cloudy romance which swayed the minds of his mother and father.

Indeed the home life of which this boy found himself a part and the various contacts, material and psychic, which thus far had been his, did not tend to convince him of the reality and force of all that his mother and father seemed so certainly to believe and say. Rather, they seemed more or less troubled in their lives, at least materially. His father was always reading the Bible and speaking in meeting at different places, especially in the “mission,” which he and his mother conducted not so far from this corner. At the same time, as he understood it, they collected money from various interested or charitably inclined business men here and there who appeared to believe in such philanthropic work. Yet the family was always “hard up,” never very well clothed, and deprived of many comforts and pleasures which seemed common enough to others. And his father and mother were constantly proclaiming the love and mercy and care of God for him and for all. Plainly there was something wrong somewhere. He could not get it all straight, but still he could not help respecting his mother, a woman whose force and earnestness, as well as her sweetness, appealed to him. Despite much mission work and family cares, she managed to be fairly cheerful, or at least sustaining, often declaring most emphatically “God will provide” or “God will show the way,” especially in times of too great stress about food or clothes. Yet apparently, in spite of this, as he and all the other children could see, God did not show any very clear way, even though there was always an extreme necessity for His favorable intervention in their affairs.

To-night, walking up the great street with his sisters and brother, he wished that they need not do this any more, or at least that he need not be a part of it. Other boys did not do such things, and besides, somehow it seemed shabby and even degrading. On more than one occasion, before he had been taken on the street in this fashion, other boys had called to him and made fun of his father, because he was always publicly emphasizing his religious beliefs or convictions. Thus in one neighborhood in which they had lived, when he was but a child of seven, his father, having always precluded every conversation with “Praise the Lord,” he heard boys call “Here comes old Praise-the-Lord Griffiths.” Or they would call out after him “Hey, you’re the fellow whose sister plays the organ. Is there anything else she can play?”

“What does he always want to go around saying, ‘Praise the Lord’ for? Other people don’t do it.”

It was that old mass yearning for a likeness in all things that troubled them, and him. Neither his father nor his mother was like other people, because they were always making so much of religion, and now at last they were making a business of it.

On this night in this great street with its cars and crowds and tall buildings, he felt ashamed, dragged out of normal life, to be made a show and jest of. The handsome automobiles that sped by, the loitering pedestrians moving off to what interests and comforts he could only surmise; the gay pairs of young people, laughing and jesting and the “kids” staring, all troubled him with a sense of something different, better, more beautiful than his, or rather their life.

And now units of this vagrom and unstable street throng, which was forever shifting and changing about them, seemed to sense the psychologic error of all this in so far as these children were concerned, for they would nudge one another, the more sophisticated and indifferent lifting an eyebrow and smiling contemptuously, the more sympathetic or experienced commenting on the useless presence of these children.

“I see these people around here nearly every night now—two or three times a week, anyhow,” this from a young clerk who had just met his girl and was escorting her toward a restaurant. “They’re just working some religious dodge or other, I guess.”

“That oldest boy don’t wanta be here. He feels outa place, I can see that. It ain’t right to make a kid like that come out unless he wants to. He can’t understand all this stuff, anyhow.” This from an idler and loafer of about forty, one of those odd hangers-on about the commercial heart of a city, addressing a pausing and seemingly amiable stranger.

“Yeh, I guess that’s so,” the other assented, taking in the peculiar cast of the boy’s head and face. In view of the uneasy and self-conscious expression upon the face whenever it was lifted, one might have intelligently suggested that it was a little unkind as well as idle to thus publicly force upon a temperament as yet unfitted to absorb their import, religious and psychic services best suited to reflective temperaments of maturer years.

Yet so it was.

As for the remainder of the family, both the youngest girl and boy were too small to really understand much of what it was all about or to care. The eldest girl at the organ appeared not so much to mind, as to enjoy the attention and comment her presence and singing evoked, for more than once, not only strangers, but her mother and father, had assured her that she had an appealing and compelling voice, which was only partially true. It was not a good voice. They did not really understand music. Physically, she was of a pale, emaculate and unimportant structure, with no real mental force or depth, and was easily made to feel that this was an excellent field in which to distinguish herself and attract a little attention. As for the parents, they were determined upon spiritualizing the world as much as possible, and, once the hymn was concluded, the father launched into one of those hackneyed descriptions of the delights of a release, via self-realization of the mercy of God and the love of Christ and the will of God toward sinners, from the burdensome cares of an evil conscience.

“All men are sinners in the light of the Lord,” he declared. “Unless they repent, unless they accept Christ, His love and forgiveness of them, they can never know the happiness of being spiritually whole and clean. Oh, my friends! If you could but know the peace and content that comes with the knowledge, the inward understanding, that Christ lived and died for you and that He walks with you every day and hour, by light and by dark, at dawn and at dusk, to keep and strengthen you for the tasks and cares of the world that are ever before you. Oh, the snares and pitfalls that beset us all! And then the soothing realization that Christ is ever with us, to counsel, to aid, to hearten, to bind up our wounds and make us whole! Oh, the peace,

the satisfaction, the comfort, the glory of that!”

“Amen!” asseverated his wife, and the daughter, Hester, or Esta, as she was called by the family, moved by the need of as much public support as possible for all of them—echoed it after her.

Clyde, the eldest boy, and the two younger children merely gazed at the ground, or occasionally at their father, with a feeling that possibly it was all true and important, yet somehow not as significant or inviting as some of the other things which life held. They heard so much of this, and to their young and eager minds life was made for something more than street and mission hall protestations of this sort.

Finally, after a second hymn and an address by Mrs. Griffiths, during which she took occasion to refer to the mission work jointly conducted by them in a near-by street, and their services to the cause of Christ in general, a third hymn was indulged in, and then some tracts describing the mission rescue work being distributed, such voluntary gifts as were forthcoming were taken up by Asa—the father. The small organ was closed, the camp chair folded up and given to Clyde, the Bible and hymn books picked up by Mrs. Griffiths, and with the organ supported by a leather strap passed over the shoulder of Griffiths, senior, the missionward march was taken up.

During all this time Clyde was saying to himself that he did not wish to do this any more, that he and his parents looked foolish and less than normal—“cheap” was the word he would have used if he could have brought himself to express his full measure of resentment at being compelled to participate in this way—and that he would not do it any more if he could help. What good did it do them to have him along? His life should not be like this. Other boys did not have to do as he did. He meditated now more determinedly than ever a rebellion by which he would rid himself of the need of going out in this way. Let his elder sister go if she chose; she liked it. His younger sister and brother might be too young to care. But he—

“They seemed a little more attentive than usual to-night, I thought,” commented Griffiths to his wife as they walked along, the seductive quality of the summer evening air softening him into a more generous interpretation of the customary indifferent spirit of the passer-by.

“Yes; twenty-seven took tracts to-night as against eighteen on Thursday.”

“The love of Christ must eventually prevail,” comforted the father, as much to hearten himself as his wife. “The pleasures and cares of the world hold a very great many, but when sorrow overtakes them, then some of these seeds will take root.”

“I am sure of it. That is the thought which always keeps me up. Sorrow and the weight of sin eventually bring some of them to see the error of their way.”

They now entered into the narrow side street from which they had emerged and walking as many as a dozen doors from the corner, entered the door of a yellow single-story wooden building, the large window and the two glass panes in the central door of which had been painted a gray-white. Across both windows and the smaller panels in the double door had been painted: “The Door of Hope. Bethel Independent Mission. Meetings Every Wednesday and Saturday night, 8 to 10. Sundays at 11, 3 and 8. Everybody Welcome.” Under this legend on each window were printed the words: “God is Love,” and below this again, in smaller type: “How Long Since You Wrote to Mother?”

The small company entered the yellow unprepossessing door and disappeared.

Chapter 2

That such a family, thus cursorily presented, might have a different and somewhat peculiar history could well be anticipated, and it would be true. Indeed, this one presented one of those anomalies of psychic and social reflex and motivation such as would tax the skill of not only the psychologist but the chemist and physicist as well, to unravel. To begin with, Asa Griffiths, the father, was one of those poorly integrated and correlated organisms, the product of an environment and a religious theory, but with no guiding or mental insight of his own, yet sensitive and therefore highly emotional and without any practical sense whatsoever. Indeed it would be hard to make clear just how life appealed to him, or what the true hue of his emotional responses was. On the other hand, as has been indicated, his wife was of a firmer texture but with scarcely any truer or more practical insight into anything.

The history of this man and his wife is of no particular interest here save as it affected their boy of twelve, Clyde Griffiths. This youth, aside from a certain emotionalism and exotic sense of romance which characterized him, and which he took more from his father than from his mother, brought a more vivid and intelligent imagination to things, and was constantly thinking of how he might better himself, if he had a chance; places to which he might go, things he might see, and how differently he might live, if only this, that and the other things were true. The principal thing that troubled Clyde up to his fifteenth year, and for long after in retrospect, was that the calling or profession of his parents was the shabby thing that it appeared to be in the eyes of others. For so often throughout his youth in different cities in which his parents had conducted a mission or spoken on the streets—Grand Rapids, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, lastly Kansas City—it had been obvious that people, at least the boys and girls he encountered, looked down upon him and his brothers and sisters for being the children of such parents. On several occasions, and much against the mood of his parents, who never countenanced such exhibitions of temper, he had stopped to fight with one or another of these boys. But always, beaten or victorious, he had been conscious of the fact that the work his parents did was not satisfactory to others,—shabby, trivial. And always he was thinking of what he would do, once he reached the place where he could get away.

For Clyde's parents had proved impractical in the matter of the future of their children. They did not understand the importance or the essential necessity for some form of practical or professional training for each and every one of their young ones. Instead, being wrapped up in the notion of evangelizing the world, they had neglected to keep their children in school in any one place. They had moved here and there, sometimes in the very midst of an advantageous school season, because of a larger and better religious field in which to work. And there were times, when, the work proving highly unprofitable and Asa being unable to make much money at the two things he most understood—gardening and canvassing for one invention or another—they were quite without sufficient food or decent clothes, and the children could not go to school. In the face of such situations as these, whatever the children might think, Asa and his wife remained as optimistic as ever, or they insisted to themselves that they were, and had unwavering faith in the Lord and His intention to provide.

The combination home and mission which this family occupied was dreary enough in most of its phases to discourage the average youth or girl of any spirit. It consisted in its entirety of one long store floor in an old and decidedly colorless and inartistic wooden building which was situated in that part of Kansas City which lies north of Independence Boulevard and west of Troost Avenue, the exact street or place being called Bickel, a very short thoroughfare opening off Missouri Avenue, a somewhat more lengthy but no

less nondescript highway. And the entire neighborhood in which it stood was very faintly and yet not agreeably redolent of a commercial life which had long since moved farther south, if not west. It was some five blocks from the spot on which twice a week the open air meetings of these religious enthusiasts and proselytizers were held.

And it was the ground floor of this building, looking out into Bickel Street at the front and some dreary back yards of equally dreary frame houses, which was divided at the front into a hall forty by twenty-five feet in size, in which had been placed some sixty collapsible wood chairs, a lectern, a map of Palestine or the Holy Land, and for wall decorations some twenty-five printed but unframed mottoes which read in part:

“WINE IS A MOCKER, STRONG DRINK IS RAGING AND WHOSOEVER IS DECEIVED THEREBY IS NOT WISE.”

“TAKE HOLD OF SHIELD AND BUCKLER, AND STAND UP FOR MINE HELP.” PSALMS 35:2.

“AND YE, MY FLOCK, THE FLOCK OF MY PASTURE, are men, AND I AM YOUR GOD, SAITH THE LORD GOD.” EZEKIEL 34:31.

“O GOD, THOU KNOWEST MY FOOLISHNESS, AND MY SINS ARE NOT HID FROM THEE.” PSALMS 69:5.

“IF YE HAVE FAITH AS A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED, YE SHALL SAY UNTO THIS MOUNTAIN, REMOVE HENCE TO YONDER PLACE; AND IT SHALL MOVE; AND NOTHING SHALL BE IMPOSSIBLE TO YOU.” MATTHEW 17:20.

“FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD IS NEAR.” OBADIAH 15.

“FOR THERE SHALL BE NO REWARD TO THE EVIL MAN.” PROVERBS 24:20.

“LOOK, THEN, NOT UPON THE WINE WHEN IT IS RED: IT BITETH LIKE A SERPENT, AND STINGETH LIKE AN ADDER.” PROVERBS 23:31,32.

These mighty adjurations were as silver and gold plates set in a wall of dross.

The rear forty feet of this very commonplace floor was intricately and yet neatly divided into three small bedrooms, a living room which overlooked the backyard and wooden fences of yards no better than those at the back; also, a combination kitchen and dining room exactly ten feet square, and a store room for mission tracts, hymnals, boxes, trunks and whatever else of non-immediate use, but of assumed value, which the family owned. This particular small room lay immediately to the rear of the mission hall itself, and into it before or after speaking or at such times as a conference seemed important, both Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths were wont to retire— also at times to meditate or pray.

How often had Clyde and his sisters and younger brother seen his mother or father, or both, in conference with some derelict or semi-repentant soul who had come for advice or aid, most usually for aid. And here at times, when his mother's and father's financial difficulties were greatest, they were to be found thinking, or as Asa Griffiths was wont helplessly to say at times, “praying their way out,” a rather ineffectual way, as Clyde began to think later.

And the whole neighborhood was so dreary and run-down that he hated the thought of living in it, let alone being part of a work that required constant appeals for aid, as well as constant prayer and thanksgiving to sustain it.

Mrs. Elvira Griffiths before she had married Asa had been nothing but an ignorant farm girl, brought up without much thought of religion of any kind. But having fallen in love with him, she had become inoculated with the virus of Evangelism and proselytizing which dominated him, and had followed him gladly and enthusiastically in all of his ventures and through all of his vagaries. Being rather flattered by the knowledge that she could speak and sing, her ability to sway and persuade and control people with the “word of God,” as she saw it, she had become more or less pleased with herself on this account and so persuaded to continue.

Occasionally a small band of people followed the preachers to their mission, or learning of its existence through their street work, appeared there later—those odd and mentally disturbed or distraught souls who are to be found in every place. And it had been Clyde’s compulsory duty throughout the years when he could not act for himself to be in attendance at these various meetings. And always he had been more irritated than favorably influenced by the types of men and women who came here—mostly men—down-and-out laborers, loafers, drunkards, wastrels, the botched and helpless who seemed to drift in, because they had no other place to go. And they were always testifying as to how God or Christ or Divine Grace had rescued them from this or that predicament—never how they had rescued any one else. And always his father and mother were saying “Amen” and “Glory to God,” and singing hymns and afterward taking up a collection for the legitimate expenses of the hall—collections which, as he surmised, were little enough—barely enough to keep the various missions they had conducted in existence.

The one thing that really interested him in connection with his parents was the existence somewhere in the east—in a small city called Lycurgus, near Utica he understood—of an uncle, a brother of his father’s, who was plainly different from all this. That uncle—Samuel Griffiths by name—was rich. In one way and another, from casual remarks dropped by his parents, Clyde had heard references to certain things this particular uncle might do for a person, if he but would; references to the fact that he was a shrewd, hard business man; that he had a great house and a large factory in Lycurgus for the manufacture of collars and shirts, which employed not less than three hundred people; that he had a son who must be about Clyde’s age, and several daughters, two at least, all of whom must be, as Clyde imagined, living in luxury in Lycurgus. News of all this had apparently been brought west in some way by people who knew Asa and his father and brother. As Clyde pictured this uncle, he must be a kind of Croesus, living in ease and luxury there in the east, while here in the west—Kansas City—he and his parents and his brother and sisters were living in the same wretched and hum-drum, hand-to-mouth state that had always characterized their lives.

But for this—apart from anything he might do for himself, as he early began to see—there was no remedy. For at fifteen, and even a little earlier, Clyde began to understand that his education, as well as his sisters’ and brother’s, had been sadly neglected. And it would be rather hard for him to overcome this handicap, seeing that other boys and girls with more money and better homes were being trained for special kinds of work. How was one to get a start under such circumstances? Already when, at the age of thirteen, fourteen and fifteen, he began looking in the papers, which, being too worldly, had never been admitted to his home, he found that mostly skilled help was wanted, or boys to learn trades in which at the moment he was not very much interested. For true to the standard of the American youth, or the general American attitude toward life, he felt himself above the type of labor which was purely manual. What! Run a

machine, lay bricks, learn to be a carpenter, or a plasterer, or plumber, when boys no better than himself were clerks and druggists' assistants and bookkeepers and assistants in banks and real estate offices and such! Wasn't it menial, as miserable as the life he had thus far been leading, to wear old clothes and get up so early in the morning and do all the commonplace things such people had to do?

For Clyde was as vain and proud as he was poor. He was one of those interesting individuals who looked upon himself as a thing apart—never quite wholly and indissolubly merged with the family of which he was a member, and never with any profound obligations to those who had been responsible for his coming into the world. On the contrary, he was inclined to study his parents, not too sharply or bitterly, but with a very fair grasp of their qualities and capabilities. And yet, with so much judgment in that direction, he was never quite able—at least not until he had reached his sixteenth year—to formulate any policy in regard to himself, and then only in a rather fumbling and tentative way.

Incidentally by that time the sex lure or appeal had begun to manifest itself and he was already intensely interested and troubled by the beauty of the opposite sex, its attractions for him and his attraction for it. And, naturally and coincidentally, the matter of his clothes and his physical appearance had begun to trouble him not a little—how he looked and how other boys looked. It was painful to him now to think that his clothes were not right; that he was not as handsome as he might be, not as interesting. What a wretched thing it was to be born poor and not to have any one to do anything for you and not to be able to do so very much for yourself!

Casual examination of himself in mirrors whenever he found them tended rather to assure him that he was not so bad-looking—a straight, well-cut nose, high white forehead, wavy, glossy, black hair, eyes that were black and rather melancholy at times. And yet the fact that his family was the unhappy thing that it was, that he had never had any real friends, and could not have any, as he saw it, because of the work and connection of his parents, was now tending more and more to induce a kind of mental depression or melancholia which promised not so well for his future. It served to make him rebellious and hence lethargic at times. Because of his parents, and in spite of his looks, which were really agreeable and more appealing than most, he was inclined to misinterpret the interested looks which were cast at him occasionally by young girls in very different walks of life from him—the contemptuous and yet rather inviting way in which they looked to see if he were interested or disinterested, brave or cowardly.

And yet, before he had ever earned any money at all, he had always told himself that if only he had a better collar, a nicer shirt, finer shoes, a good suit, a swell overcoat like some boys had! Oh, the fine clothes, the handsome homes, the watches, rings, pins that some boys sported; the dandies many youths of his years already were! Some parents of boys of his years actually gave them cars of their own to ride in. They were to be seen upon the principal streets of Kansas City flitting to and fro like flies. And pretty girls with them. And he had nothing. And he never had had.

And yet the world was so full of so many things to do—so many people were so happy and so successful. What was he to do? Which way to turn? What one thing to take up and master—something that would get him somewhere. He could not say. He did not know exactly. And these peculiar parents were in no way sufficiently equipped to advise him.

Chapter 3

One of the things that served to darken Clyde's mood just about the time when he was seeking some practical solution for himself, to say nothing of its profoundly disheartening effect on the Griffiths family as a whole, was the fact that his sister Esta, in whom he took no little interest (although they really had very little in common), ran away from home with an actor who happened to be playing in Kansas City and who took a passing fancy for her.

The truth in regard to Esta was that in spite of her guarded up-bringing, and the seeming religious and moral fervor which at times appeared to characterize her, she was just a sensuous, weak girl who did not by any means know yet what she thought. Despite the atmosphere in which she moved, essentially she was not of it. Like the large majority of those who profess and daily repeat the dogmas and creeds of the world, she had come into her practices and imagined attitude so insensibly from her earliest childhood on, that up to this time, and even later, she did not know the meaning of it all. For the necessity of thought had been obviated by advice and law, or "revealed" truth, and so long as other theories or situations and impulses of an external or even internal, character did not arise to clash with these, she was safe enough. Once they did, however, it was a foregone conclusion that her religious notions, not being grounded on any conviction or temperamental bias of her own, were not likely to withstand the shock. So that all the while, and not unlike her brother Clyde, her thoughts as well as her emotions were wandering here and there—to love, to comfort—to things which in the main had little, if anything, to do with any self-abnegating and self-immolating religious theory. Within her was a chemism of dreams which somehow counteracted all they had to say.

Yet she had neither Clyde's force, nor, on the other hand, his resistance. She was in the main a drifter, with a vague yearning toward pretty dresses, hats, shoes, ribbons and the like, and super-imposed above this, the religious theory or notion that she should not be. There were the long bright streets of a morning and afternoon after school or of an evening. The charm of certain girls swinging along together, arms locked, secrets a-whispering, or that of boys, clownish, yet revealing through their bounding ridiculous animality the force and meaning of that chemistry and urge toward mating which lies back of all youthful thought and action. And in herself, as from time to time she observed lovers or flirtation-seekers who lingered at street corners or about doorways, and who looked at her in a longing and seeking way, there was a stirring, a nerve plasm palpitation that spoke loudly for all the seemingly material things of life, not for the thin pleasantries of heaven.

And the glances drilled her like an invisible ray, for she was pleasing to look at and was growing more attractive hourly. And the moods in others awakened responsive moods in her, those rearranging chemisms upon which all the morality or immorality of the world is based.

And then one day, as she was coming home from school, a youth of that plausible variety known as "masher" engaged her in conversation, largely because of a look and a mood which seemed to invite it. And there was little to stay her, for she was essentially yielding, if not amorous. Yet so great had been her home drilling as to the need of modesty, circumspection, purity and the like, that on this occasion at least there was no danger of any immediate lapse. Only this attack once made, others followed, were accepted, or not so quickly fled from, and by degrees, these served to break down that wall of reserve which her home training had served to erect. She became secretive and hid her ways from her parents.

Youths occasionally walked and talked with her in spite of herself. They demolished that excessive shyness which had been hers, and which had served to put others aside for a time at least. She wished for other contacts—dreamed of some bright, gay, wonderful love of some kind, with some one.

Finally, after a slow but vigorous internal growth of mood and desire, there came this actor, one of those vain, handsome, animal personalities, all clothes and airs, but no morals (no taste, no courtesy or real tenderness even), but of compelling magnetism, who was able within the space of one brief week and a few meetings to completely befuddle and enmesh her so that she was really his to do with as he wished. And the truth was that he scarcely cared for her at all. To him, dull as he was, she was just another girl—fairly pretty, obviously sensuous and inexperienced, a silly who could be taken by a few soft words—a show of seemingly sincere affection, talk of the opportunity of a broader, freer life on the road, in other great cities, as his wife.

And yet his words were those of a lover who would be true forever. All she had to do, as he explained to her, was to come away with him and be his bride, at once—now. Delay was so vain when two such as they had met. There was difficulty about marriage here, which he could not explain—it related to friends—but in St. Louis he had a preacher friend who would wed them. She was to have new and better clothes than she had ever known, delicious adventures, love. She would travel with him and see the great world. She would never need to trouble more about anything save him; and while it was truth to her—the verbal surety of a genuine passion—to him it was the most ancient and serviceable type of blarney, often used before and often successful.

In a single week then, at odd hours, morning, afternoon and night, this chemic witchery was accomplished.

Coming home rather late one Saturday night in April from a walk which he had taken about the business heart, in order to escape the regular Saturday night mission services, Clyde found his mother and father worried about the whereabouts of Esta. She had played and sung as usual at this meeting. And all had seemed all right with her. After the meeting she had gone to her room, saying that she was not feeling very well and was going to bed early. But by eleven o'clock, when Clyde returned, her mother had chanced to look into her room and discovered that she was not there nor anywhere about the place. A certain bareness in connection with the room—some trinkets and dresses removed, an old and familiar suitcase gone—had first attracted her mother's attention. Then the house search proving that she was not there, Asa had gone outside to look up and down the street. She sometimes walked out alone, or sat or stood in front of the mission during its idle or closed hours.

This search revealing nothing, Clyde and he had walked to a corner, then along Missouri Avenue. No Esta. At twelve they returned and after that, naturally, the curiosity in regard to her grew momentarily sharper.

At first they assumed that she might have taken an unexplained walk somewhere, but as twelve-thirty, and finally one, and one-thirty, passed, and no Esta, they were about to notify the police, when Clyde, going into her room, saw a note pinned to the pillow of her small wooden bed—a missive that had escaped the eye of his mother. At once he went to it, curious and comprehending, for he had often wondered in what way, assuming that he ever wished to depart surreptitiously, he would notify his parents, for he knew they would never countenance his departure unless they were permitted to supervise it in every detail. And now here was Esta missing, and here was undoubtedly some such communication as he might have left. He picked it up, eager to read it, but at that moment his mother came into the room and, seeing it in his hand, exclaimed: "What's that? A note? Is it from her?" He surrendered it and she unfolded it, reading it quickly. He noted that her strong broad face, always tanned a reddish brown, blanched as she turned away

toward the outer room. Her biggish mouth was now set in a firm, straight line. Her large, strong hand shook the least bit as it held the small note aloft.

“Asa!” she called, and then tramping into the next room where he was, his frizzled grayish hair curling distractedly above his round head, she said: “Read this.”

Clyde, who had followed, saw him take it a little nervously in his pudgy hands, his lips, always weak and beginning to crinkle at the center with age, now working curiously. Any one who had known his life’s history would have said it was the expression, slightly emphasized, with which he had received most of the untoward blows of his life in the past.

“Tst! Tst! Tst!” was the only sound he made at first, a sucking sound of the tongue and palate—most weak and inadequate, it seemed to Clyde. Next there was another “Tst! Tst! Tst!”, his head beginning to shake from side to side. Then, “Now, what do you suppose could have caused her to do that?” Then he turned and gazed at his wife, who gazed blankly in return. Then, walking to and fro, his hands behind him, his short legs taking unconscious and queerly long steps, his head moving again, he gave vent to another ineffectual “Tst! Tst! Tst!”

Always the more impressive, Mrs. Griffiths now showed herself markedly different and more vital in this trying situation, a kind of irritation or dissatisfaction with life itself, along with an obvious physical distress, seeming to pass through her like a visible shadow. Once her husband had gotten up, she reached out and took the note, then merely glared at it again, her face set in hard yet stricken and disturbing lines. Her manner was that of one who is intensely disquieted and dissatisfied, one who fingers savagely at a material knot and yet cannot undo it, one who seeks restraint and freedom from complaint and yet who would complain bitterly, angrily. For behind her were all those years of religious work and faith, which somehow, in her poorly integrated conscience, seemed dimly to indicate that she should justly have been spared this. Where was her God, her Christ, at this hour when this obvious evil was being done? Why had He not acted for her? How was He to explain this? His Biblical promises! His perpetual guidance! His declared mercies!

In the face of so great a calamity, it was very hard for her, as Clyde could see, to get this straightened out, instantly at least. Although, as Clyde had come to know, it could be done eventually, of course. For in some blind, dualistic way both she and Asa insisted, as do all religionists, in disassociating God from harm and error and misery, while granting Him nevertheless supreme control. They would seek for something else—some malign, treacherous, deceiving power which, in the face of God’s omniscience and omnipotence, still beguiles and betrays—and find it eventually in the error and perverseness of the human heart, which God has made, yet which He does not control, because He does not want to control it.

At the moment, however, only hurt and rage were with her, and yet her lips did not twitch as did Asa’s, nor did her eyes show that profound distress which filled his. Instead she retreated a step and reexamined the letter, almost angrily, then said to Asa: “She’s run away with some one and she doesn’t say—” Then she stopped suddenly, remembering the presence of the children—Clyde, Julia, and Frank, all present and all gazing curiously, intently, unbelievably. “Come in here,” she called to her husband, “I want to talk to you a minute. You children had better go on to bed. We’ll be out in a minute.”

With Asa then she retired quite precipitately to a small room back of the mission hall. They heard her click the electric bulb. Then their voices were heard in low converse, while Clyde and Julia and Frank looked at each other, although Frank, being so young—only ten—could scarcely be said to have comprehended fully. Even Julia hardly gathered the full import of it. But Clyde, because of his larger contact with life and his mother's statement ("She's run away with some one"), understood well enough. Esta had tired of all this, as had he. Perhaps there was some one, like one of those dandies whom he saw on the streets with the prettiest girls, with whom she had gone. But where? And what was he like? That note told something, and yet his mother had not let him see it. She had taken it away too quickly. If only he had looked first, silently and to himself!

"Do you suppose she's run away for good?" he asked Julia dubiously, the while his parents were out of the room, Julia herself looking so blank and strange.

"How should I know?" she replied a little irritably, troubled by her parents' distress and this secretiveness, as well as Esta's action. "She never said anything to me. I should think she'd be ashamed of herself if she has."

Julia, being colder emotionally than either Esta or Clyde, was more considerate of her parents in a conventional way, and hence sorrier. True, she did not quite gather what it meant, but she suspected something, for she had talked occasionally with girls, but in a very guarded and conservative way. Now, however, it was more the way in which Esta had chosen to leave, deserting her parents and her brothers and herself, that caused her to be angry with her, for why should she go and do anything which would distress her parents in this dreadful fashion. It was dreadful. The air was thick with misery.

And as his parents talked in their little room, Clyde brooded too, for he was intensely curious about life now. What was it Esta had really done? Was it, as he feared and thought, one of those dreadful runaway or sexually disagreeable affairs which the boys on the streets and at school were always slyly talking about? How shameful, if that were true! She might never come back. She had gone with some man. There was something wrong about that, no doubt, for a girl, anyhow, for all he had ever heard was that all decent contacts between boys and girls, men and women, led to but one thing—marriage. And now Esta, in addition to their other troubles, had gone and done this. Certainly this home life of theirs was pretty dark now, and it would be darker instead of brighter because of this.

Presently the parents came out, and then Mrs. Griffiths' face, if still set and constrained, was somehow a little different, less savage perhaps, more hopelessly resigned.

"Esta's seen fit to leave us, for a little while, anyhow," was all she said at first, seeing the children waiting curiously. "Now, you're not to worry about her at all, or think any more about it. She'll come back after a while, I'm sure. She has chosen to go her own way, for a time, for some reason. The Lord's will be done." ("Blessed be the name of the Lord!" interpolated Asa.) "I thought she was happy here with us, but apparently she wasn't. She must see something of the world for herself, I suppose." (Here Asa put in another Tst! Tst! Tst!) "But we mustn't harbor hard thoughts. That won't do any good now—only thoughts of love and kindness." Yet she said this with a kind of sternness that somehow belied it—a click of the voice, as it were. "We can only hope that she will soon see how foolish she has been, and unthinking, and come back. She can't prosper on the course she's going now. It isn't the Lord's way or will. She's too young and she's made a mistake. But we can forgive her. We must. Our hearts must be kept open, soft and tender." She talked as though she were addressing a meeting, but with a hard, sad, frozen face and voice. "Now, all of you go to bed. We can only pray now, and hope, morning, noon and

night, that no evil will befall her. I wish she hadn't done that," she added, quite out of keeping with the rest of her statement and really not thinking of the children as present at all—just of Esta.

But Asa!

Such a father, as Clyde often thought, afterwards.

Apart from his own misery, he seemed only to note and be impressed by the more significant misery of his wife. During all this, he had stood foolishly to one side—short, gray, frizzled, inadequate.

"Well, blessed be the name of the Lord," he interpolated from time to time. "We must keep our hearts open. Yes, we mustn't judge. We must only hope for the best. Yes, yes! Praise the Lord—we must praise the Lord! Amen! Oh, yes! Tst! Tst! Tst!"

"If any one asks where she is," continued Mrs. Griffiths after a time, quite ignoring her spouse and addressing the children, who had drawn near her, "we will say that she has gone on a visit to some of my relatives back in Tonawanda. That won't be the truth, exactly, but then we don't know where she is or what the truth is—and she may come back. So we must not say or do anything that will injure her until we know."

"Yes, praise the Lord!" called Asa, feebly.

"So if any one should inquire at any time, until we know, we will say that."

"Sure," put in Clyde, helpfully, and Julia added, "All right."

Mrs. Griffiths paused and looked firmly and yet apologetically at her children. Asa, for his part, emitted another "Tst! Tst! Tst!" and then the children were waved to bed.

At that, Clyde, who really wanted to know what Esta's letter had said, but was convinced from long experience that his mother would not let him know unless she chose, returned to his room again, for he was tired. Why didn't they search more if there was hope of finding her? Where was she now—at this minute? On some train somewhere? Evidently she didn't want to be found. She was probably dissatisfied, just as he was. Here he was, thinking so recently of going away somewhere himself, wondering how the family would take it, and now she had gone before him. How would that affect his point of view and action in the future? Truly, in spite of his father's and mother's misery, he could not see that her going was such a calamity, not from the GOING point of view, at any rate. It was only another something which hinted that things were not right here. Mission work was nothing. All this religious emotion and talk was not so much either. It hadn't saved Esta. Evidently, like himself, she didn't believe so much in it, either.

Chapter 4

The effect of this particular conclusion was to cause Clyde to think harder than ever about himself. And the principal result of his thinking was that he must do something for himself and soon. Up to this time the best he had been able to do was to work at such odd jobs as befall all boys between their twelfth and fifteenth years: assisting a man who had a paper route during the summer months of one year, working in the basement of a five-and-ten-cent store all one summer long, and on Saturdays, for a period during the winter, opening boxes and unpacking goods, for which he received the munificent sum of five dollars a

week, a sum which at the time seemed almost a fortune. He felt himself rich and, in the face of the opposition of his parents, who were opposed to the theater and motion pictures also, as being not only worldly, but sinful, he could occasionally go to one or another of those—in the gallery—a form of diversion which he had to conceal from his parents. Yet that did not deter him. He felt that he had a right to go with his own money; also to take his younger brother Frank, who was glad enough to go with him and say nothing.

Later in the same year, wishing to get out of school because he already felt himself very much belated in the race, he secured a place as an assistant to a soda water clerk in one of the cheaper drug stores of the city, which adjoined a theater and enjoyed not a little patronage of this sort. A sign—"Boy Wanted"—since it was directly on his way to school, first interested him. Later, in conversation with the young man whose assistant he was to be, and from whom he was to learn the trade, assuming that he was sufficiently willing and facile, he gathered that if he mastered this art, he might make as much as fifteen and even eighteen dollars a week. It was rumored that Stroud's at the corner of 14th and Baltimore streets paid that much to two of their clerks. The particular store to which he was applying paid only twelve, the standard salary of most places.

But to acquire this art, as he was now informed, required time and the friendly help of an expert. If he wished to come here and work for five to begin with—well, six, then, since his face fell—he might soon expect to know a great deal about the art of mixing sweet drinks and decorating a large variety of ice creams with liquid sweets, thus turning them into sundaes. For the time being apprenticeship meant washing and polishing all the machinery and implements of this particular counter, to say nothing of opening and sweeping out the store at so early an hour as seven-thirty, dusting, and delivering such orders as the owner of this drug store chose to send out by him. At such idle moments as his immediate superior—a Mr. Sieberling—twenty, dashing, self-confident, talkative, was too busy to fill all the orders, he might be called upon to mix such minor drinks—lemonades, Coca-Colas and the like—as the trade demanded.

Yet this interesting position, after due consultation with his mother, he decided to take. For one thing, it would provide him, as he suspected, with all the ice-cream sodas he desired, free—an advantage not to be disregarded. In the next place, as he saw it at the time, it was an open door to a trade—something which he lacked. Further, and not at all disadvantageously as he saw it, this store required his presence at night as late as twelve o'clock, with certain hours off during the day to compensate for this. And this took him out of his home at night—out of the ten- o'clock-boy class at last. They could not ask him to attend any meetings save on Sunday, and not even then, since he was supposed to work Sunday afternoons and evenings.

Next, the clerk who manipulated this particular soda fountain, quite regularly received passes from the manager of the theater next door, and into the lobby of which one door to the drug store gave—a most fascinating connection to Clyde. It seemed so interesting to be working for a drug store thus intimately connected with a theater.

And best of all, as Clyde now found to his pleasure, and yet despair at times, the place was visited, just before and after the show on matinee days, by beves of girls, single and en suite, who sat at the counter and giggled and chattered and gave their hair and their complexions last perfecting touches before the mirror. And Clyde, callow and inexperienced in the ways of the world, and those of the opposite sex, was never weary of observing the beauty, the daring, the self-sufficiency and the sweetness of these, as he saw