

## Chapter II

## His Mother Lives Here

He turned left and he was on Washington Street, and the fifth house, not counting the one on the corner, is where his mother lives. His mother's house. He has been away so long that now it was his mother's house. Designated so, for he had not lived in that house for ever so long. A mother has to live somewhere, and his mother lives here. All the mothers that live in houses, and don't live in houses - that live in the earth and above the earth, in the sky, in the stars - the Mother of ALL. Mother that gave birth to sun, moon, and this Earth! But his mother lives here - the fifth house from the corner. His mother's house. Across the street from the house there is a big round light, suspended from a thick tall pole, creating a pool of light on the ground and in the air, through which wisps of snow are flying. They come in and come out of the circular orbit of light, to appear and disappear into darkness, like moths - destiny unknown. A good spot to wipe your perspiration and catch your breath, before making the final plunge. Six months ago - before - you ran up and down the stairs to your house without giving it a thought, but now.....?

Six months can be a long time. Ten years can be a short time. Now it is your mother's house - your mother lives here. The fact that you lived here too six months ago has no bearing on it at all. Now it is a house

his mother lives in. Her abode. Abode, abode - the abode of the soul! That's what abode is. The house will be a shrine to -- the abode... His grim thoughts born of fear for her life. Since Dr. Capen had divulged to him the secrets of his mother's heart - her heart's life; that mysterious click-clack, the tick, tick, instead of the tick-teck as it should be. The medics also designate it as the lub-dub. If it's lub-lub it's no good, for it indicates a sameness of note and tone. And the second sound shouldn't have the same pitch. And what does it all mean? It means it seems that the left part of the heart, or the left ventricle as they call it, which bears the greatest burden has lost, or is losing its resiliency, its reserve power, and that any sudden extra effort may cause a split of the tenuous walls, a collapse. His mother's heart-walls pumping on desperately and dangerously... Why in ~~the~~ had he told him all that? Maybe it's for the best. He'd be able to watch over her - warn her.

It's a modest house in a modest neighborhood, with none of the pretensions of her sister's mansion. She couldn't afford a better place, but she was perfectly satisfied. It's good for the soul to live humbly and honestly. Not that her sister hadn't lived honestly. Somehow simplicity in one's life implied honesty, for it usually meant a simple soul, and a simple soul was an honest soul. Oh, she was happy with her lot. That is as happy as one can be with the loss of a husband, who... Well, she has a son. His son. For he had tried to model his son after him since infancy. And when his son was struck down with that awful malady that's when he really went to work on his mind, to mold it in his own design. So it was <sup>a reaffirmation,</sup> for her, a reincarnation of her husband in his son. He, hers as well. She was happy.

George looked up to the house from the pool of light where he was standing and saw that it was brilliantly lit. All the rooms were aflame with light. Especially the kitchen, with the incandescent gas-mantel. It was a white bright glow. It must be a new and large mantel to give off such whiteness. Maybe all the lights are for company. He hoped not. He'd meet his

mother alone.

The clamor and labor of hurrying up a stairway came to an end as he stepped at the door of the second floor apartment. Then the door opened, and a white shaft of light swallowed him and a corner of his valise. His mother stood in it. She was looking at him with eyes brilliant with moisture, and a face wrought into a mask of a happy smile. He dropped his burden and ran to her and took her in his arms. His arms were a bit too tight around her, for she let out a stifled sigh, as if from breathlessness. He felt the staccato of her beating heart against his right chest, and relaxed his hold of her, and kissed her radiant face.

In the world of grief and evil we tremble at the sight of rolling darkness, and at the thought that the black clouds <sup>sk</sup> would engulf us and <sup>sk</sup> would last forever, for we cannot see a chink in the solid massive blackness, nor the glow of a ray of light in the turbulence of the livid purple shadow. And in the world of brightness we tremble lest its shining light be of brief duration, like the sunbeams chased by cloud-shadows.

In this happy moment when mother and son faced each other, George had already seen in her eyes the shadows that would chase away the brief happiness in her face. He trembled before it.

She was first to speak: "But why are we standing here, my son? Here in the kitchen?"

Why not in the kitchen? he thought. Is this not <sup>as</sup> good a place as any part of the house? It's bright and warm here, and clean. <sup>Scrupulously</sup> and painfully clean <sup>liness,</sup> attained through the work of emaciated hands, gnarled fingers, and a fast beating heart that was made to beat faster. Why go further and inspect more of her hard labor? The parlor would be less bright, less warm, and would have the musty smell of old stuffed furniture, that even his mother's industry couldn't eradicate. The work he had caused her with his home-coming! The desperate spotlessness of the kitchen <sup>sk</sup> brought about by a

desperate and destitute spirit that worked her fingers to the 'bone', and maybe swelled her knees with pains with its clean and faintly disinfectant-smelling air. What contrast ~~was~~ the natural roseate and easy sparkling-stainlessness of the Berely kitchen! But his mother was anxious to take him through the house. What was it?

"All right mother."

And she led him to the dining room.

As she turned on the light he turned to face the four corners of what <sup>be</sup> was to <sup>an</sup> emptiness inside, but as from the dark bottom of the ocean there erupted to the surface of the light something shiny and new to sparkle and stare in his face. A new dining table (the old one was a dilapidated round table, its veneer worn and sprung), rectangular, with its subdued rich mahogany overlay splashing a multicolored reflection into the overhanging light. Around it stood, like so many august personages, high-backed, damask-upholstered chairs, all silent and awaiting the guest. To the <sup>close on the wall</sup> left was a low buffet of the same veneer, dignified, with its array of tinted delicate china on top. Under all, the pastel colors of a newly laid Wilton rug. A painting by a master hand! That's the way the camera of his eye caught it. Now she stands at the side of the table, opposite <sup>of</sup> him, her right hand resting on it. Her head is bowed as if she dare not look up. She wants him to take it all in himself. It is her gift to him, to surprise his coming. But it was a gift to herself also, because of her love of fine things.

He came to her. "Mother, why did you do this?" And in this question he expressed his agony of fear for her, as he looked up into her face which was so pale ~~was~~ in contrast with the black hair.

"It's a new life, it gives one strength."

And now that the trepidation of her anticipation was over she smiled a wholesome cheerful smile. It was genuine, and not a mask put on for his sake. He realized now that in her aloneness there had to be something new <sup>to brighten</sup> ~~in~~ her drab existence. And the glitter of the new furnishings was that note in her

life that provided the stimulus. It is her present to him: a new contact between them when he <sup>will have</sup> (is) gone back to school. She <sup>would</sup> (ll) come into the dining-room, look at the new things, and her heart would swell with joy. He'd be with her.

He went around the table and reached her side. "I am a bad son," as he looked deep in her eyes. There was no more he could or would say, and he fell silent. He was thinking of that October night when he was in Portgrave and hadn't come to see her. Had it even occurred to him? He couldn't remember. "But", he tried to console himself, "it was one of those things one finds himself in - like a trap. No way out. In that abortive painful trip he had <sup>had</sup> no thought of his mother, because he was so confused. Not going into town, just the station... with minutes to spare for the train back..."

As if reading his thoughts, his mother said with a shy smile: "One often is prevented ~~from~~ doing his best, ah, let's say by circumstances, contrary to one's wishes." Her tone was of one pleading.

He was sure now that his trip was <sup>not un</sup>known to her. He was a fool to think otherwise. Either Blanca or her mother must have blabbed into his mother's ears. More likely it was his aunt. Of course, she never meant any harm. But just like her to do the stupid thing, not to realize the hurt she was doing to her own sister. "But I am the bad mother," she said after a while with the grimace of the smile of guilt on her face, "to spend all that money on this." And she swept her arm over the table and chairs.

"The wisest thing you could have done, mother," George said firmly. His tone of voice was reassuring and comforting to her.

"Still I am a bad mother," she said. This time bridling like a young girl, a youthful smile of happiness playing about her lips. "You must be tired and hungry, and here I keep you standing...." She fell silent

and stood looking at her son as <sup>if</sup> appraising him anew, then she turned and led the way back to the kitchen. She began to busy herself about the stove, which shone in all its black glory and radiated a pleasant warmth from a lively coal fire within.

George looked at her and the stove and guessed that her hands must have worked hard to bring out that rich black polish. And all for him. "Mother," he said, and there was a stridency in the tone of his voice, "Mother, will you sit down and rest for a while. Time enough to eat."

She turned and looked up to him, grimacing a reprimand: "The way you talk and look at me, one would think I am an invalid."

"Well," George said, a sorrowful smile playing about his mouth, "well, Mother, you worked enough for one day. I can see that." And he pointed at the huge black object before him, hissing and steaming in unison with the pans and pots on top.

"And I am happy for it," she said brightly, "and feel stronger for it."

George looked at her <sup>zi</sup>scrutiningly, and he knew that she meant it, that she wasn't trying to be gallant just to please him. She really looked fine. Maybe Dr. Capen was mistaken, the happy thought occurred to him. Doctors have been known to be in error before.

He went over to her, put his arm around her waist and almost lifted her as he turned her around to face him. "You look very well indeed. The best in a long time." And he kissed her on the cheek.

"Now let's eat before the guests arrive. Or we'll have to wait and the food will get cold. I have made everything you like, and I'd hate to see it spoiled."

"Guests!" George was surprised. "I don't want anyone else here tonight. Just you and I."

"Well, Blanca was here earlier and said she'd be here with Harold."

"Did she know I was coming tonight?"

"Shouldn't she?" his mother was surprised.

"O just... just..." he hesitated. "I wanted to be alone with you."

She inclined her head his way as she smiled to him gratefully.

So she is coming to flaunt her friend, the up-and-coming Harold, the founder of a new dynasty in the new business of "garaging, oil, automobile parts", he thought resentfully.

Even before Cynthia and Foster had brought him the news of Blanca's disaffection he had dimly expected such a break between him and her, only that it came sooner than he had expected. The distance from home, and doubts about a lasting friendship between Blanca and Harold, doubts which he perhaps wished to entertain, had gradually blunted the sharp edge of the sense of loss of her. But now that he was face to face with it - the two of them showing up any moment now - he was surprised at his sense of coolness. And so it must be. After all he must have known that the path he had chosen led past Blanca, not to her. It was pleasant - their relationship - while it lasted. There was no bitterness toward either one of them, only a slight resentment, not unmingled with a sense of amusement, even of relief. He was free, free... As if shackles - intangible ones - had been struck off his will and let his spirit roam untrammelled, and wild. If he had lacked the will to do it himself, it was done for him by good old Harold. That feeling of irritation in him was so indefinite that he could hardly account for it himself. It may just be the subconscious, uncontrolled, that still goes on with the old habits, and travels the old tracks. Well, it too will get the new drift eventually. And all would be peaceful within as without. A smile crossed his face at the thought.

As he and his mother sat eating in silence his confidence in himself to meet the situation of facing Harold and Blanca together asserted

able  
 itself to the point where he was to muse with the strictest objectivity upon the mechanics of such happenings as the sudden and phenomenal success of Harold. The chemistry of being successful he thought was a witch's brew, with the ingredients varied and weird. And as if by rote with the intent to amuse his mother, as well as himself, he said loud enough so that she could hear him: "And the mechanics of success; a hard-bitten attitude, a tough exterior and a cynical interior, a set jaw, and the brutality to crush every obstacle under foot; the element of fate, the right circumstances under the aegis of the right auspices; traits of individuality (which may or may not have been inherited); the ability to connive and bear false witness; inflexible sternness; an unquenchable lust for money, or love of a woman, or both. Most successful men are not great, and few great men are deemed successful - at least not in their lifetime." When he finished he smiled up to her in sheer enjoyment of his monologue, which completeness in its impromptness surprised him as well as his mother.

"Like a bolt from a clear sky" his mother said. "But what's all about?" she shrugged. And knowing her son for what he is, suddenly understanding came to her, and she nodded smiling: "Yes, my son, our clan is not among the successful, but yet not among the forgotten ones. And that very thought is our reward in this world...."

"And in the next world too," George wanted to say, but he just cast an admiring glance in the direction of his mother and said nothing. "Better not water the classic of her words," he thought, "let them stand alone as she had said them."

They looked like two adventurers to George when they came in. Not adventurers in the venturesome unknown, but in the definite and known, where danger had passed and the reward assured. Blanca had anticipated a great reward in that glittering future which she had compacted to share with Harold.



Harold, fat cigar in his fat face, content to let it rest there without exerting himself even to the slight effort of puffing at it, looked to George like a sleek fat seal who, having battled for and won his concubines, was quite willing to rest on his laurels and let the future take care of itself. All of Harold's timorousness and humbleness in Blanca's presence, as George had known him to be only a short few months before, <sup>had gone.</sup> he had a lot of confidence in himself, as a man sure of his conquest. He <sup>had</sup> put his arm about her in a proprietary manner, as if that were the customary thing for him to do, and (he) spoke in the possessive and inclusive "us" quite often. George thought too often. Was it meant for his special benefit? And Blanca playing the coy kitten, quite willing to nestle in the <sup>a</sup> warmth and strength of his ample bosom and be happy in the ooze of his vast embrace!

What a turning about, what a shifting, what a change in personality! Could it be that that's Blanca, inexorably and unalterably the true Blanca, was it or, merely a defensive armour, ~~which~~, which soon must crack from inner pressures and stresses?

Were already <sup>3 1 2</sup> the chinks apparent in her armor, as her words hurriedly tumbled from her lips, sometime with no coherence, as if ~~she were~~ talking ~~just~~ to hide the tumult of a gnawing feeling in her?

She ran to George before she <sup>had</sup> greeted her aunt: "Well, well, my dear cousin!" O, she tried to put a bit of mockery in her voice, but underneath it there was <sup>an</sup> underlying note of dead-earnestness. "So long we haven't seen you, my dear cousin. My brilliant cousin! Not a single word from that other world. Might just as well <sup>have</sup> been in China." When she fell to kissing him, George offered his cheek. Something revolted in him - like committing adultery. Of course it could be a cousinly kiss, but still.... He could reel her firm breast <sup>against</sup> his <sup>us</sup> ~~side~~ <sup>her</sup>, he half turned away. There was a flush <sup>surge</sup> coming up <sup>in</sup> her face as her arrogance returned to her. "Well, we are not good enough anymore for our cousin, <sup>George</sup> ~~George~~. And who can blame

him with things in the paper about him and his play...!" George stood there looking at her without saying a word. "Now my cousin lost his tongue," she rattled on, "and he used to say so much about nothing!". She shrugged her shoulders and fell silent, Like a fluttering and tortured bird finally coming to rest. It was unbelievable to George and his mother to see her lose herself this way. She looked at her son, and cast down her eyes. He was standing like a statue of cold stone. There was an added paleness to his features, but otherwise immobile.

They were all standing now, as of a necessity ~~and~~ bowing to an inevitable moment of embarrassing silence. The ticking of the clock on the mantle-piece over the stove sounded like pistol-shots in their ears. George now stood an unsuspecting, uncompromising object of comparison in the eyes of Blanca and his mother. The striking figure of a strapping and vigorous young man as against the humbled and sweating Harold, who by now was fast losing his suave urbanity, his <sup>a</sup>svoir-faire. The aroma of his cigar was still in the air, but was losing its beguiling fragrance. It was turning stale and acrid. George felt Blanca's eyes on him, and he returned her gaze. There she was, slender, ravishing in black silhouette, more desirable than ever. The faintest of blushes surmounted her cheek where the bones rounded mildly and unobtrusively, the rest of the face remaining as if in the greyness of a shadow. Too pallid. Her nostrils flared and collapsed irregularly and spasmodically, the eyes brilliant with the moisture of sadness and contrition, of a lost hope? The dampening of a shadow that crossed them --- the shadow of her inner thoughts!

An annoying and depressing stalemate between the three of them. Harold struggled forward, looked at his watch and announced: "Eight-thirty!" He hoped thereby to regain some of his lost prestige, and at the same time rescue Blanca from the hopeless tangle she was getting herself into. "We probably have missed the first act already."

Blanca eagerly grasping the extended hand, rescued her from her nightmarish dream, responded at once. "Oh, yes, tickets for the show!" And smiling at her aunt a bit ruefully, "Forgot all about it. You'll excuse us, Auntie, if we hurry along. Anyway you two have lots to talk about." Then mockingly, "haven't you, George?" With a light toss of her head, echoing her own words: "Bet you have. Lots and lots." With undue formality she extended her hand, which George pressed only lightly and briefly. He said nothing of a return visit to her house, nor had he asked her to come again, when he took them to the door.

The brief dramatic scene was swift and racking, and left George's mother exhausted, and a bit baffled. The dishes, knives and forks were still on the table in a cold state of existence, a reminder of what might have been and wasn't. The gelid remains of food coating them, was not patina of ancient bronzes to delight the eye. It was depressing. She looked at George in a silent breathless way, as if fearful to give expression to the dark question that was tormenting her.

### CHAPTER III

#### And It Came To Pass

And it came to pass at eventide, that David arose from his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.... And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her.... And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said: "I am with child."

..... And the Lord struck the child that Urian's wife bore to David, and it was very sick. David therefore besought God for the child: and David fasted, and as often as he went in, he lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and stood beside him, to raise him up from the earth; but he would not, neither would he eat bread with them..... And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died.....