

CHAPTER III

The Heavy Hand of Fate

That night Portgrave was in the throes of a conflagration. Was the burning high school a fulfillment of the janitor's premonition in his agonizing moments in the morning?

The flames were leaping furiously at the early-spring evening chill, eating an ever widening circle of diffuse crimson into the demure silent sky, as the crowds gathered in the hot glow to view the fiery spectacle. That this could be catastrophic, a drying up of their Alma Mater's succulent breast of learning on the pyre-pile, was non-existent in the minds of the student body. They took it as a leaping, inspiring bonfire; a torch, cutting a path of freedom and release from the lethargy and drone of the spring classroom, from the tedium and stagnant restlessness, the humid silence and stifled echoes in the unnatural coolness of spring inside the brick walls. A panegyric to the Rites of Spring - where no final examinations were casting a shadow of gloom. In a circle of comfortable warmth, fitfully illuminated like souls in Inferno, the young savages watched with fiendish glee the frantic struggle of the firefighters with the billowing mountains of smoke, shot through with jetting sparks and tongues of flame, as if ornamented with gleaming sequins and glowing strands of precious gems.

Baffling! Is there anything more baffling than that in the wondrous resurrection of life in the Spring, a great mother being

consumed in hell-fire! With a last burning sigh and fiery eye she observes the glow in most ^{of} her children, regret only in a few. She dies in a last baffling convulsion of disintegration, hopeless and unrequited - with the "finals" only in the next turn of the Spring Road! Above all, the baffling wonder of spring itself, the cool soft evening after a languorous twilight, the scented woods, the undulant green of tender meadows. And the girls in their spring fine flimsy finery!

The old janitor was baffled. He whirled about in the smoke-filled basement to discover the origin of the smoke. Where there is smoke there is fire, but where is the fire, the flame? No exit. Trapped like a rat. Why can't he find the spark giving off this choking miasmatic fog? He is a pinwheel, turning on an axis, like a barbecued chicken on a spit. He can't think. Suddenly an idea flashes through his brain, as if a chink had opened there. He can think. He is sure he left no live spark anywhere. Spontaneous combustion! That's it. Only recently he had learned the meaning of it from the Physics department, where almost a near-tragedy occurred. Nowhere near any source of heat. But he had been given to understand the power of the self-generating heat of such a pile. He had been all over the building cleaning and oiling, getting it ready for summer "storage". In George's classroom, where is his desk. Put something there. Can't remember what. Maybe some food article. Very seldom George has breakfast. Very often late.... Smiles to himself. Late this morning. Would be dead now if not for him. He polished George's desk. A few touches added to Cynthia's desk, next to George's. And Foster's next to Cynthia's. The three always together. He has a hunch Cynthia cares more for George. Foster, captain of football next fall! But George is George. His George now..... Good old Dr. Capen... old bache... friend of the family... would like to take care of George and his mother... enough dough for everybody. But no dice. So George's mother works and gets paler by the year, and Dr.

Capen is worried for her heart.... George is getting so many pennies per line in the Eventide. Mr. Barton sees to that. And that's no charity, every penny is earned. Enjoy reading his stuff. Know when it's his even when his name is not attached to it. Now he is going on as a regular. I know... even if old Martha tried to hide it from me. Hope George doesn't get in too deep in the ruck and muddy swamp between Forrester and Dreen. No doubt on whose side the whip would crack once he gets in. And George has the courage to get out as to get into the muck.... And young Foster has no special love for the old man. His father's death, and now his forced estrangement from his mother. Now that his mother is married to that strange man from a foreign land, this Solomon Dreen, it was easier to satisfy his grandfather ^{is with} never to see his mother. No man could ever take the place of one's own father, even though the father had hardly ever touched his memory... and been gone so long. But a pretty and lovely mother is hard to share with anybody — especially a "strange" man. And she as lovely as ever. He remembers her as Lena Thalberg. He, like everyone else in Portgrave, had followed the love and tragedy of the two! Now it's Foster and Cynthia. How much like the other two! Foster, the image of his father, his brusqueness. And Cynthia in the likeness of Lena, and just as poor. And George too.... The old triangle. But George isn't ready for any down-to-earth love affair. With his mother, and his ambition! That boy is going places. Hope he don't stay an old bache like me. Na, I was never ^{meant} for anything but a janitor — the old building my sweetheart. He thinks of the furnace — that monster-pet of his on cold winter nights... big-mouthed, convulsing with heat and flame and talking its own language — in the still winter nights. He and the furnace...! What a glutton for coal! The thousand-eyed glimmerings in the vastness of its belly! Each had a gleaming message of life—transfusing heat, each crackle and hissing spark a sweet tattoo-prick on his skin... The smoke — it

comes to him like a black wall, and he begins to choke. Choke, choke.....
Hard to breathe. George's image is before him. Now he sees him in the
bright bay of Eastern Promenade. A sunny summer's day. George dives
from the spring-board, his body ^{glistening} ~~(gleaming)~~ in the sun-dappled water, as
graceful as a gull. The swift sharp downstroke of the muscular arms, and
the power-laden torso as it cleaves the waters. Quite a jump from the
polio-wasted body of his childhood! Choke, choke, choke. The heat and
the smoke are creeping closer. Hard to breathe. Is he day-dreaming of
George - and dying! He must think. Find the source of smoke - and the
heat. Furnace as docile as a kitten. "Sp^ontaneous combustion, spontan..."
Like a magic formula it revolves in his head. A weird incantation, an
exorcism raping his mind, and preventing him ^{from} ~~to~~ find the source of the
fire. Pile of oily rags, must find it! If it burns no job. Old Doc Mo-
narch says give up job and live. He is a finicky old maid. Clings to
life like ivy. To me it's poison without the school.... If the school
burns.... Captain going down with the ship... Might as well. Ripe for
the journey. The Journey! He smiles inspite of himself. Nothing in
life.... Choke.... The switch...! The pillar of smoke blinds him. Can't
find the light switch. Confusion engulfs him. The pinwheel of life. In-
terlaced with dark smoke and bright flame. Layer upon layer of speeding
circles of black and incandescent white, framing in their alternate sha-
dows visions of a lifetime. On the brink-- Will it be dark or light
beyond? Choke... He must rest, perhaps lie down. His lungs won't have
to pump so hard. Will slow down heart in the race for life. Learned a
few tricks..... in this well of learning. Heat goes up, and with it the
smoke - lie down. Takes a long breath. Slight searing of the lungs....
But there is a pleasantness of relaxation. A numbness! He can hardly
move his limbs. Doesn't care much. Pleasant sensation of release comes
over him. Is it the lassitude that comes with eternal rep^ose.....? ^a ~~Passing~~
through the Gate? He is still alive. He feels the scorching heat. Ins-

tinctively, a last effort, he covers his head with his hands...

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The baffling wonder of the citizenry, the mighty and the lowly.

An old institution, like a beloved personality, grips you when it perishes before your eyes. During the long years of its existence it became a part of your mode of life, your panoramic vision, part of the landscaping of your imagination. And when it isn't there anymore, it still exists in the twilight mind, in the night, in the pre-dawn - when the mind is in a state of half somnolence. For it is attached to your heartstrings, where feeling originates. It's like another being within you, and when it goes up in smoke its ashes can never fill the vacuum it leaves. But the ghost-shadows do...!

Though George had an inner sense of release at the abrupt end of the school year, he felt a nostalgic regret as he watched the old walls crack and buckle in heaps of fiery ruin. Demons peering out of flaming craters, ghosts through skeletal eyes! Fond memories had been reduced to gray morbidity of smoke and ashes. Suddenly his body went numb with the shock of remembrance. Jan Jensen's murmured words about a mysterious fog! "And I saw flames..... and the old school was dying in an agony of fire. And I...!" He said he would ^{rather} die with the school, than die of a bad heart without the school. Did he, like Samson, ^ucase the ruins about him ~~in~~ in a last attempt to die with the school? Or is the school finishing what his bad heart started this morning? Where is he? The old fool! Had he tried to save himself and couldn't? He made a quick move toward the burning building. But had to step back. Too late. He rushed to the firemen: "The janitor, Jan Jensen! Jensen!" pointing to the collapsing walls.

Blanca was her restless, wild, viable self; her black hair, black eyes glowing a blue sheen in the leaping flames. She was moving fast from place to place so that Harold was hard put ~~to~~ to keep up with her. Her constant chatter was broken occasionally by a short snort from

his capable nose. George was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to follow the pair around with his eyes.

Foster was his solid stalwart self, in perfect control of his emotions, as behooves the paternal side of his ancestry. He stood there watching, maybe enjoying the spectacle as one enjoys a Fourth of July bonfire. He was not too gay, but neither was he sad. He was not demonstrative; just stood there a faint smile on his ^{lips,} hardly articulate.

Cynthia stood in moody silence inspired by the awesome scene, witnessing something unremembered and unforgettable; unable to comprehend or think of the impact it will have on her. It was unreal. At such time she should be at George's side. And she was. To put a trembling hand on his arm, or not to, that's the question. Unaware of her trepidation George looked down on the lovely head at his shoulder, reflecting gold from the burning crimson, and he wished he could love her.

There is a warm friendship in the reflected light of a conflagration which draws people from all walks of life together into one communicable group. An integral, interchanging, interlocuting community. Foes become friends. For there is need for an exchange of ideas, of relating experiences before the colossus that threatens them all. The monster that menaces yet draws them together.

A strange community:—

Savages dancing before the burnt-offering to propitiate an angry deity.

Ghosts of hell, hell-fire reflected in wild countenances.

Angels of heaven looking down on the assembled variegated mob below.

The mob, the curse, the blessing!

The baskers in the light of misfortune.

The ghouls.

The villain, the devil, the Angel!

The consuming flame above them all - roaring, hissing, sputtering!
Here the malignant stares and the lashing tongues found their mark.
The mark and focus - Lena!

Lena, forsaken by God and forgotten by man.

Now to be remembered.

How long, Mother, since you have seen your son?

Now you see him beyond you in the vague flicker of the dancing flame.

Just beyond your reach. A step or two. You feel faint with the sheer emotion of his nearness. And you lean on your husband's arm. Surely, it's your son there. The set of his shoulders, the very poise of his head. A noble creature. Your heart aches for the touch of him.

Her husband puts a restraining hand on her arm, not to make a public display of herself. He understands and sees the temper of the mob. But she sees only the wall, built up by her father-in-law, that separates her from her son. Georg^d's words ring in her ears: "The power, the piety and petty peevishness of the old man is like a wall between Foster and you. Only he has no piety, nor pity..." How true, especially since she married again. But how long can a mother be restrained!

The shadow of a wall and the fire burning it out.

The hiatus between her son and her husband.

Spanned by three small steps.

The tongues (spinned and) lashed. ^{cut} Lena, of the house of ill-fame on the waterfront. Lena, whose husband went to his grave for her sins. Lena, who hasn't the right to her own flesh and blood - despised by her own son. Married again - and the husband still may be among the living. Lena, ah... wasn't she a slut herself! Lena, whose judgment day cannot be far off. And that precious husband of hers, the new one, keeping young girls in shame and harlotry under pretense of theatricals. If it

weren't for Mr. Forrest's protest in the paper...! How long will the community take it? This stench, this shame for our own children! A sanctimonious ringing of hands.

Lena stood spellbound, staring at the silhouetted figure in the benighted purple-yellow light. It was her son. She was sure. Cynthia on his right, George on his left. The three always together. She belonged there. The step to be taken - from her husband to her son. Her husband was proud. A son should come to his mother. Not a mother begging for her son's affection. Love for her son, and love for her husband! There is more of ethereal quality, a heightened sensitiveness in mother-and-son relationship. There is a ^{an} ^ohungering ache of spiritual quality which is never gratified. It knows no reasoning, boundaries; no beginning and no end. It's one's partisan passion of but little earthly quality, bound with the tenderness of a gossamer thread; but as robust as the stoutest cable that could hold the earth in anchorage.

She reached out a hand to him. But the heart was pounding and the eyes blinded. She didn't see the the pulsating snaked firehose under foot. Her foot caught and she tripped rather violently. One gigantic effort to steady herself, and she managed to grab hold of her son's coat. Mother and son went down in a heap together. And as she lay in the agony of a twisted leg, the malignant tongues went off again.

"She's bound to drag him down with her."

"What can you expect from the likes of her."

And a third: "Filth to filth. And such a nice boy, too."

"No credit to her," from the first one.

Then came the word that really mattered: "Mother!"

Tongues were stilled at the anguished cry.

A cry of defiance. Defiance of his grandfather and of the world of dogmas and decrees; of the false standards that cause a timid mother to fumble in humbleness and fear for her son. How to atone for the creduli-

ties and sins of the others and his own! To press her hard to him, to kiss and pat the soft thickness of her hair, inhale the delicate scent that reminds him so much of Cynthia!

"Oh, mother, are you hurt!" he whispered with the hoarseness of the cruel stringency of his neglect of her that had ^s constricted his throat.

Her face grey with pain she managed a smile for him, as she lay in his embrace for all the world to see. At last they are alone. He and she.

Solomon sprang to her side and untangled the bruised leg. "Mothers get hurt loving their sons too much," he whispered a reproach. It was an unwise and badly-timed remark. But being a man of quick emotions, and with the grinding pain in him at her suffering, he may be forgiven. Foster made no answer. He was too engrossed in his mother. Maybe the glaring truth of his stepfather's words were beginning to dawn on him.

George and Cynthia stood apart, too intimate a family scene to intrude upon. A mist-glimmer appeared in Cynthia's eyes. She squeezed George's hand hard in hers.

"It's for the soul," George expressed a sobering thought.

"For the body too," she whispered, "for the soul nouris^hth the body."

He lifted a small hand to his lips and kissed it.

Now, the circle of human bodies began to press in closer. Had the spectacle of fire begun to wane before this human-interest drama, or had they begun losing interest before? The fickleness of the mob!

Word went around with incredible speed.

Now, what do you think of her latching on to the poor boy!

"It's she from...?"

"Yeh, from the kept-flats."

"The slut!"

"Bet she drove her husband to his death."

"And married already. Before his bones...."

"If she waited for his bones to moulder she'd have to marry in another century," a wag put in. "Anyway, he's dead long enough for a

pretty one like her."

"Go on with you," a blowze with straggling hair tried to shoo him away.

"Go on yourself, old witch," and he spat loudly. "Take your broom and skidoo. No moon, no witch's night. Can't take it, huh, too nice for you. Too much love, heh?"

"She is no good," another female tongue. "Deserves to have boy taken away from her."

"She's got him back, see."

"In the olden days they'd stone her."

"They ought to stone the old man these days," he taunted. "It's he who caused the plight and tragedy of his own son." Raising his voice with emphasis, "He the one that killed his son..."

Standing up to his full height, head thrown back, he moved into the center of things at the same time a couple of bullies were seen moving in the general direction of the three on the ground.

"Look here now..." he snarled. But there was a bustling and a pressing forward, apparently launched by the two hoods.

"In the olden days they would..." an old ^{Woman}(female) resumed.

The self-appointed defender, shifting his weight, confronted in a straight line the pair of intruders. He took off ^fhis jacket, displaying such power of torso and arms that the two halted in their tracks.

"Now listen, you old benighted..." he turned on the old female "I should say what I have started. But I am a Christian, and have Christian charity. Have you? I had ambitions once. I went to school with the girl. And a finer one never was."

"And a pretty one, bet you..." one of the hoods yelled as he turned and hurried off into the crowd.

"The coward!" the stout defender shouted, "yiping like a bitch and tailing it off with the tail between his ^{"hind"}legs."

"You, she is only a... a wh...!" the other one wanted to show he wasn't scared. The flash of a fist and the spurt of blood from the mouth left the ugly word unsaid. He whirled away fast.

"Now as I was saying, the finest! Of course she was pretty, was that her fault! That her father was a poor Jewish immigrant, was that her fault? That Foster's father was a bigoted skin-flint, and drove his only son out of the house, was that her fault? That his son innocently bought an inn that turned out to be a house of ill fame, was that her fault? That her husband ran ^a _^ away when he found his baby-son in the arms of a broad and his wife weeping, was that her fault?" Arms akimbo he stood a threatening colossus. A few were moving off in silence.

There was a shuffling through the crowd. Two dark-visaged and sinister looking brawlers were being rushed forward by the fellow with the bleeding gaping mouth toward the challenger. George, who had witnessed the imbroglio a short distance away with uncertainty whether to poke a fist into the face of one of the thugs for the good of all, seeing the two pushing along, took a step forward. At the same moment he saw two blue-frocked police officers, with their tall grey helmets, night-sticks twirling, proceeding in the same direction, and he stepped back. They cut aswath to the injured woman.

"One side you," they threatened with their billies, "one side, and keep the passage clear."

There was a steady capricious tooting of an automobile horn, still a strange sound in the year of 1911, and Dr. Elias Capen appeared in his new Franklin. Its brand new and shiny appearance caused a murmur and stirring in the crowd, dispersing first to allow passage and then closing in to stand in awe and admiration.

Dr. Capen stooped down to examine Lena's leg. Methodically and efficiently. He announced that the right ankle was fractured. "I'll have to take her to the office to set it," he said. Turning to George, "You

take her head, I'll take the legs. Got to be careful of the ankle. No, not you Dreen," as Solomon tried clumsily to be helpful. "You are only a husband," a smile flickering on the doctor's kindly face. His good humor showing up in an emergency. "That's it, George. To the car with her. You two may come along." Solomon and Foster followed into the car.

The plaster-cast on Lena's ^{leg} foot had hardly hardened when ~~when~~ Clara, Mr. Forrest's second wife, entered. She went directly to Lena and kissed her, as she fondled the lovely disarray of her hair lying in soft wavy folds about the head.

Foster went over and took Clara's hand. "Thank you," he said. The words sounded a bit hollow in his ears, as if the voice belonged to someone else. As if it were an echo. But George knew that Foster meant it. If he had no love for his grandfather's second wife there was a healthy and respectful relationship between the two. Clara's subtle interventions had helped Foster often to see his mother - until his mother married again.

Clara looked into the eyes of Foster and opened hungry arms to embrace him. Over his head she smiled up to Dr. Capen, saying enigmatically, "So we meet again...!"

CHAPTER IV

...From The Depths My Salvation...

Perhaps it was because of his non-aggressive, sensitive nature that Dr. Elias Capen had a hard struggle ^{getting started} (to get initiated) in the practice of medicine. As a matter of fact, there was no start at all for two months, and in the third there was one call. In the fourth month he made three calls - and for the rest of the year the ratio was about three per week.