CHAPTER XXII

Once or twice out of kindness I went and stayed with Grandmother, when Lily Spiouini was absent. Lily often spent nights with her girl friends.

I shared the sitting-room with Edie and slept on Lily's iron cot. It wore out my patience to stay in the dirty, wretched place, into which vermin crept and which was covered with street dust. It was hot in the heat, cold in the cold. Snouts and cries entered it on both sides. The bathroom and kitchen were not more than compart- ments in a dark passageway. These compartments, into which hardly any light came, were full of women's old dingy clothing, half wet or rough dry. The drains were clogged. Boys and men living in the house knew the trick of the broken door lock and could push it open. At night the girls pushed the bolt which barely held in the outer wood. Yet these apartments were considered of quite good rank, and there were even women who thought Grandmother well off having an apartment to herself which she could rent out.

It was intolerable to me. It was weeks since Edie had spoken to my grandfather, but after one night of it, I felt that way myself. Only a wriggling would put up with it, I thought, despising Edie. I scolded Grandmother and told her to move out at once and send the news to my father. She must live decently.

Grandmother was broken with disappointment, and with the idea that "there were no more steps on the line; she was almost at her

termination." I asked the English girl why she treated Grandmother so badly, and then she told me strange tales about the old lady, which I was unable to believe.

"She's a liar, a hypocrite, a cadger, and shy as a fog," said Edie. She gets letters from her son every week and saves his money by investing it. And that Lily is—poor to the bad."

This unlikely description of my dear little grandmother, and Cousin Lily, who were both merely poor strangers, warned me, I thought: Am I mad, is she mad, or is Grandmother mad? Then the poor girl went on to tell me of her own troubles. She began to speak glowingly of the home she had left. She told about the home Grandmother had promised in America. I think poor Jenny Fox had been dreaming of living with Grandmother Mogran.

"And I, who lived in luxury at home, was not satisfied," said Edie: "well, for instance, she told me that for a dollar a day, only four shillings, you could be dressed like a princess, and at the same time wages were so high that every girl could save money and get a husband. Working girls went on world tours to the Bahamas or to Paris. And, of course, I've seen them myself."

I said: "How could you believe such things? You must know if wages are high, prices are high. I thought your sisters were socialists. One of your sisters is even a communist. I know. I've seen her selling the Daily Worker in Baker Street, London."

She said: "I never troubled my head with such rubbish and I didn't think they should have. Amazing attention; making us look queer."

"I'm a communist," I said.

"You," she answered sharply, "what difference does it make to you? You've got two rich grandmothers and a waggon-load of other relations. It's real selfish of my sisters to bring that trouble to the house. The police came once." She continued: "If you saw what we had at home. Axminster, Chippendale furniture, and Wedgwood. We're an Adams door, and it's on one of those quiet, lovely streets."

She went on with her dreamy description, breaking it into with her sharp notes, which made it very real.

"How long have you been living there?" I asked, in surprise.

"For years and years. My youngest sister was born there. I went away and lived with my married sister, but I came back to it. They were so selfish."

"Yes," I said, smiling.

"You see, married people get very small-minded. The least thing they flare up. To pieces, they go to pieces like an old chair; the dust
flies. Any little thing that goes wrong and they want to throw you out and it's all over. A flat friendship—finished. She's the same, your grandmother. It's the petty life. Just to go out and pick in other people's plates. That's not much of an aim in life, is it? That was theirs. And never took me. Out of the money I gave them for the rent, I got nothing, a bare roof over my head. Nothing like I had at home. They must have thought I was cracked. The village grown born to be placed. I always remember your father telling me, in London, you can fool the people one time, but you can't fool them all of the time. Have you heard him say that? It is true. It is true. Isn't it?" "That's not quite it, but—yes."
"I've often thought—" "But the sentiment is more or less right. It's this way—"
"True, right you are," said Edie, "not a trace of it. Like I said to my brother-in-law. I am not as green as you think. I thought my society would suit them. What a nice compact you have. In that real. Things are expensive here. . . . And there's no beer water here most of the time. I can't stand it, I tell you."
"I'm derive if I would."
"You don't have to. Anyhow, I'm fed up with this gold coast. I'm going home. I've got nothing better at home. And no strange man coming in. I don't think it's right, if your grandmother does.
A young man sleeping in the kitchen, with two young women here."
"What?"
"She says it's her nephew, Bert Hutt. And a policeman on the opposite side of the street, all day, two days now, watching for him, because he did something. Some young man, she says, because he brought the old fool a quack cake."
"Say," I said, "don't talk about Grandmas that way. She's old, but not a fool. What's this about a cop?"
It turned out that Bert, Lily Spongton's cousin, had climbed in at their front window in this apartment, nearly killed Grandmother with fright, and had slept on the floor of Grandmother's room until morning. They had done knocking at the door saying that a man had been seen climbing in at the window. Grandmother said no and looked such a frightened thing in her crumpled white flannel, night-gown and her little white pig-tails, that they just gave an appreciative grim at the two girls in bed, and went out again.
But both the girls were wide awake with fear. They believed that Grandmother was harboring a criminal intentionally. He hid in the flat and slept in the kitchen. He was a petty boy, seventeen, destitute, cowardly. He said he had taken some pictures from someone's apartment. "They asked me to have them valued and they say I stole; perhaps I misunderstood them."
He told Grandmother she had plenty of room and that he would move in till he found a job. He had a pretty girl with a ten-thousand-dollar dowry. He was going to London, to see her father and bring him to see Grandmother anytime. He left the apartment by the back window at nightfall to go and visit his girl, and came back after the movies were out.
Grandmother sadly hated Bert's older brother, aged thirty-five. He was "a lasher and was pulling twenty dollars out of the air, an artisan, just like that and would not have his young brother with him. This man had had the misfortune to visit poor Grandmother, without a cream cake."
This was not at all. A foreign woman, old, but younger than Grandmother, was persecuting her every day, trying to get space in the flat. This woman was a White Russian. She had been a revolutioner, she told Grandmother (when she discovered that Grandmother was an old-time socialist), and had run away from home as a girl and gone to Moscow to learn what to do. Later on, a worker in a district council, she had met her husband, who had become a great general under Dumas—"
"Don't tell me another Russian General," I cried.
But Edie, in perfect good faith, went through to the end.
They had one son, aged ten, who sat all day on the toilet seat and read. No one could get in; but the boy was "brilliant and it was the only place he had to himself!" They were being dispossessed this week; the sidewalk was their next address. My grandmother must move her home with them. The woman clawed her fiercely: "What right have you to a roof when others have none—think of old men, a young child! Throw these boarders out. They've have money! Make your son get you a larger place. You say he was in London!"
Mrs. General Rode was a woman of great force, a terrible pest; she would not go. Everything she wanted was not only her right, but part of a Bill of Rights for Manhood. The husband, a hero, voted against her sometimes. She spent the day in the street, brow-beating Grandmother, and eating her poor victuals. What all this, Grandmother had not the strength to eat anything, but sat with dark circles under her eyes, a face of smoke; and she became troubled in her mind.
The accusations that Mrs Rode invented against Solander took body before her. Thus she sometimes thought Solander was a robber and wanted who laughed at her and spent her hard-earned
The was nothing to what Mrs Rode said, for Mrs Rode could begin at nine in the morning (when she came with her husband for her morning tea), in the course of a prosecuting attorney, and timed herself so well that her preparation would wind up exactly at six, when she was obliged to go and cook lentils for her husband. They went to bed without tea at night and without bread or light, simply because Grandmother refused to have them there. Jenny Fox was even glad of her nephew’s presence in the flat. Mrs Rode had been a little easier to get away. But she told Mrs Fox that her nephew was a second-rate, and would be in the jug in two weeks. She laughed to scorn the story about the ten-thousand-dollar dowry.

“He wants your money! Old women are afraid of burglars, and it is always their nephews who kill them.”

Grandmother lived in horror. But Mrs Rode was not a vampire. All she had in mind was to get a little bit of Grandmother’s room space for herself.

Grandmother was flattered because the woman next door often knocked on the wall to know if she could come in and talk to her. She was a lovely young wife, Grandmother thought, with two beautiful children; “a pleasure to look at them”. But what did she really want? She wanted to keep the children’s clothes in one of the two unpainted wooden closets the girls had put in: “I have so many children and there is no closer space in these miserable apartments.”

I listened to this, lying on my back, with my eyes on the ceiling. I could not let Edie see my feelings. I was puzzled, too. I knew now Edie was a liar. She must have forgotten that I had once been with Grandmother to the place she lived in, in London. It was in a black street, one block long, off Wardour Street. On one side was a brick wall, enclosing a yard. On the other were narrow tenement houses in very bad condition. It was one of those slums, rich in remembrance to Jewish owners. In the basement of one of these, completely below ground-level, was a two-room flat running back and front. In the front room, Edie’s respectable and honorable family had attempted to arrange a friendly sitting-room. It was clean; a fire was generally necessary in the grate on account of the damp and cold; and two little china vases stood on the mantelshelf. The sisters grouped themselves round the mantelshelf, and people looked at the vases.

On a bookstand were the usual English classics: Bunyan, Shakespeare, the Bible, one volume from the International Bible Study (this was Elam’s), something on the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, a novel about the Indian Mutiny, some Dickens, and some socialist classics. On the countertops were community pamphlets and standard works. A red cloth covered the table. Apart from tables and chairs this was all they owned.

The father was dying of tuberculosis, and one of the daughters had kept him. The mother was dead. The girls filled the room with life and one was quite plump, but Edie had sat mournfully to one side, dark, mournful, and dissatisfied with everything; ashamed, as I now knew. As for me, I despised them all. I never could stand anything poor, wretched and ugly. If I am a socialist, it is just because of that.

I went home to tell my mother about all these would-be boarders. We both wrote very indignant letters to my father. Why should Grandma live in this misery? Where was her money? He must come back and get her a better apartment.

CHAPTER XXIII

Here is the last letter I received from Jacky before she rejoined us. She had now left the Aunt and come home to Green Acres to live with Grandma Morgan. Grandma was holding another pow-wow there, because she had received a marriage proposal, by air mail, from an aged physician in California. My belief is that Grandma never intended to marry, at her age, but used these romances as a means of keeping her by now middle-aged and married family around her in her declining years. Jacky’s letter ran:

Green Acres Inn, New Canaan
Oct. 20, 1936
Dear lift,
How I and Merry Hallowe’en! I am sending you a parcel (an Indian doll) and wish you the best, as to, to become the secretary of an American Stalin. If I haven’t written to you, here’s the reason. Aunt Phyllis and her latest husband, Bob, were here at our place, Green Acres, for the week-end. When your letter came, everyone wanted to read it. "Letty is so cute." If you read the title—it wasn’t the stable! Pretending to hand it to Aunt Phyllis, I dropped it in the frog pond by accident—only, by the same accident, the letter became quite soggy and I forgot where you would be for Hallowe’en, and Mother only just got here. Here is the reason for my silence. Mother’s visit is end and of course they discuss family affairs. They ask: "How are we to live?" Grandma paid up at Stans Pet We only have the money Papa sends us and he is not a money-maker. Mother has money from Grandfather’s estate, but
cannot get it from Grandma Morgan's brothers, as they want it for the business. We have so many expenses and poor Mother, as you know, spends up to the hilt. And yet we do not live like princes and do not throw it around and Mother just dresses in that black and white and is absolutely white-haired. I myself don't see why she doesn't dye it, as they all say, but she thinks it would look as if she wished to marry again, which, of course, would be shocking. They say she had a dreadful life. Grandma and Grandpa were so busy making money they had not a moment and Grandma lived twenty-three hours a day, only not for the children. Mother says when she wanted money for a new dress, at eight years old, she used to go to the Pantheon room and pull Grandma's dress: Grandma always just answered: "I need," or something. We are supposed to be going to Mexico with Dora and Uncle Philip next year in spring. It is very high (Mexico City). Phillip chose this because we will all be rich with the exchanges. Mamma says it is because the girls are so pretty. Philip says he wants to help Papa; he is fond of Papa and says Papa is a very good, kind man. He told me privately he knew Die Kossakhs. He has known her since the beginning, but Mamma does not know this! Philip says she (D.K.) is nice! But I know now he sees everything from the standpoint of his own moral weakness. Consider this!

From the political point of view: I am nearly fourteen, am very proud, have got fat, have great hopes not well defined, how could you expect me to be a communist? Isn't that for the depressed? I don't understand political views except on the part of the wretched, of snobs, or of people like you, with a vague hope of success. Think it over a bit; you think it's wonderful of you to fuss about the unfortunate, you want to give them a sacrificial living. Put yourself in their place instead! Would you like to lead a life regulated from one end to the other, work from this hour to that on this day or that without any choice on your part? Would you be happy? Wouldn't you go mad thinking that the entire world had a life built on your design, hour for hour, day for day? To be forced to stay where you were, never to travel, to be tied to one job, one set of meals, one type of entertainment (oh, I saw some agitprop—

I won't say a word of what I think), to belong to a political club, to be bored to death with political duties and the impertinence of one hundred thousand citizen critics and commissars coming to tell you how to draw and write and all your squalling! I paint nothing. I met a boy whose father and mother were there. They have nothing to fear, they are rich liberals and can pay for everything; they had the best of everything; just the same, the food was terrible, and the bedbugs (I have to write this awful word), in the bottle, and much worse, I cannot write it. They took away their photographs for inspection! But this is not the main thing, I admit. I deny the beauty in a soviet government. Literature—art—where are they? Aren't they alive? Otherwise we are ants and bees. Read—
you'll realize—the poetry and prose are nothing. Of course, I put this old trickster Goriki on one side, he's a dilettante, who does not believe, who goes from place to place and is fitted everywhere, has no sense to pay. When they asked Baekeland to come to his genius, he replied—suicide, liberty—where could you find pignority, originality in your internal Russian paradise? Genius is not an automaton which produces, saliva, and digests at regulated hours when you press a button. How could you describe the world if it's unknown to you (because the world doesn't punch the clock)?

What emotions could a writer or artist have in Russia? False, based entirely on his imagination! Our world, he doesn't know. Their world is inhuman. And why write? All writing would be identical? What is writing? It is to see the "cases" around you and make a book about them explaining the causes of suffering and love; it is not to support political doctrines. I simply state that I don't care for the exasperating "benefits" of communism. I prefer to suffer and beg.

You foresaw this, and you said to me—Fascism would be equally intolerable to me. I am an American, in other words, quite intolerable of putting up with any such systems. That's true. Now, I admire Stalin as much as Mussolini, Goriki as John Dos Passos, Leonaud de Viti as Delacour. I am not prejudiced. A friend of those people we know—who went to Russia—have a house in 5th Street and have Delacours, Gauguins, Picasso, Matisses, Van Goghs, Guernica originals, also some El Greco of dubious authenticity, but one certain Rembrandt—so you see they have no use to grind, they have everything—they have a friend in Paris who was a high official in the Veterans' Creuse de Fos, and who knew a communist who had much protection in high official circles (can you imagine it?) and he spent 350,000 francs yearly on 11 casual mistresses, one queen of the harems and one legal wife, the whole situation lived very well—and that, Letty, is a communist! Very nice. I don't doubt it appealed to him. But that is Mormonism! I don't think, you'd care to be even the legal wife in such a garroon of women. You must look reality in the face. And this golden calf, which you would have adored, once elected, you can imagine, how he will fill his pockets! Well, he'll have no

You say you know the theory and I don't know a word of it.
Well, that's true, but fortunately, I know the truth. If the U.S.A. or England become soviet, my child, the best I can with an
enthusiastic like you, is that you will be one of the ones on top. At
least better for my sister Lotty, just the same, to oppress, than to
suffer things like that! I am getting an autograph od James Joyce,
and will give it to you for New Year's. He is nearly blind and walks
very slowly with a stick, but pretends he can see. Oh, the God of
eyes, he is not a kind God. I must confess I don't like what I said
to you about this last year; I do not believe any more in the God of
eyes. How childish I was. Look at the paper I am using! I got it
from the Green Acres desk just now; I love the gold initial, but alas,
it is not mine. I read Gide, Gide, Mszczokowski, Dostoiwski,
Napoleon, Goethe, Des Passen, Dreiser—so much. I am half mad
with the excitement and joy of living. You see, I could not bear for
them to take it away from me and put me in a factory. I read from
morning to night—I get quite breathless and pale, but don't stop.
"Look out for your eyes! My eyes are wonderful!" I read Delacroix's
journal. Now I am sure I am an artist. I got all the books
I saw mentioned in the Columbia University year-book for
the first year (mean I am getting them one by one) and I am reading
them all. Oh, the thirst for knowing things! I love it, I adore my
life. When I go there, I'll say: "Put me in Second Year!" Of course,
they won't. Imagine I am going to go to Hunter and I will know so much
more. I am swallowing the classics alive; Victor Hugo, Lot
Miehrak, bad art, no art, socialist art, I should say. What a sickly
creature she is, and of course she marries well—pooh! Yes, and I
myself a year ago was talking about princes—according to myself
then, he (V.H.) is right, young girls are sickly and I was one. Then
Jack London (I like animals), Life of Taylorism; Spinoza, I am
trying to understand and think I can, but it is the beauty of man
and Spinoza's style more than his ideas, though I am now become an
atheist and understand this. Then I am collecting gramophone
records, Tarantuzi, Canaux, GERALDINE FARRIS, NELLE MELBA,
EMMA CALVE; and I have ninety-eight autographs. I write to them,
as soon as I read a review or critique (good or bad, for some famous
people have started with bad reviews), but it is only if the
critique, good or bad, gives me that glorious burning feeling of the
tool that tells me, I am in the possession of genius. Oh, genius! It is
try life. I am living only for it. One day I will meet a genius, or more
than one, male and female. I have seen all the plays in New York
this month and every new movie. (Here followed a list, with
sentiments upon the love relations and marriages of all the actors
and actresses, as well as glowing commendations of all the roles she
had seen them in.) Martha Graham, etc., etc. I am saving every
movie I can to get the autographs of some of the illustrous dead,
many I can to get the autographs of some of the illustrious dead,
many I can to get the autographs of some of the illustrious dead,
alone—and even about politics, if you must and if you don’t try to convert my above all, we will talk of the usual life but not in public. We’ll have a long serious conversation about it—it’s necessary, for we are beyond where grandmas and mammas can help—and of course, it’s profoundly interesting. Don’t bring up politics at our first meeting! I only saw you once in these recent months and you brought it up. It was so strange. I had a feeling we didn’t get along. Terrible. Perhaps politics will separate us for life! I saw no chance of that, I would pretend to be on your side and what advantage would that be to you? I mean, I am thinking of your political honor. We are all well; we’ll see each other again. I am looking forward to it—and afraid. Oh, I hope our separate experiences have not separated us so already. I got on well everywhere; why not with you?

Your Jacky.