

More Than Just a House, F. Scott Fitzgerald

This was the sort of thing Lew was used to—and he'd been around a good deal already. You came into an entrance hall, sometimes narrow New England Colonial, sometimes cautiously spacious. Once in the hall, the host said: "Clare"—or Virginia, or Darling—"this is Mr. Lowrie." The woman said, "How do you do, Mr. Lowrie," and Lew answered, "How do you do, Mrs. Woman." Then the man suggested, "How about a little cocktail?" And Lew lifted his brows apart and said, "Fine," in a tone that implied: "What hospitality—consideration—attention!" Those delicious canapés. "M'm'm! Madame, what are they—broiled feathers? Enough to spoil a stronger appetite than mine."

But Lew was on his way up, with six new suits of clothes, and he was getting into the swing of the thing. His name was up for a downtown club and he had his eye on a very modern bachelor apartment full of wrought-iron swinging gates—as if he were a baby inclined to topple downstairs—when he saved the life of the Gunther girl and his tastes underwent revision.

This was back in 1925, before the Spanish-American—No, before whatever it is that has happened since then. The Gunther girls had got off the train on the wrong side and were walking along arm in arm, with Amanda in the path of an approaching donkey engine. Amanda was rather tall, golden and proud, and the donkey engine was very squat and dark and determined. Lew had no time to speculate upon their respective chances in the approaching encounter; he lunged at Jean, who was nearest him, and as the two sisters clung together, startled, he pulled Amanda out of the iron pathway by such a hair's breadth that a piston cylinder touched her coat.

And so Lew's taste was changed in regard to architecture and interior decoration. At the Gunther house they served tea, hot or iced, sugar buns, gingerbread and hot rolls at half-past four. When he first went there he was embarrassed by his heroic status—for about five minutes. Then he learned that during the Civil War the grandmother had been saved by her own grandmother from a burning house in Montgomery County, that father had once saved ten men at sea and been recommended for the Carnegie medal, that when Jean was little a man had saved her from the surf at Cape May—that, in fact, all the Gunthers had gone on saving and being saved for the last fifty years and that their real debt to Lew was that now there would be no gap left in the tradition.

This was on the very wide, vine-curtained veranda ["The first thing I'd do would be tear off that monstrosity," said a visiting architect] which almost completely bounded the big square box of the house, circa 1880. The sisters, three of them, appeared now and then during the time Lew drank tea and talked to the older people. He was only twenty-six himself and he wished Amanda would stay uncovered long enough for him to look at her, but only Bess, the sixteen-year-old sister, was really in sight; in front of the two others interposed a white-flannel screen of young men.

"It was the quickness," said Mr. Gunther, pacing the long straw rug, "that second of coordination. Suppose you'd tried to warn them—never. Your subconscious mind saw that they were joined together—saw that if you pulled one, you pulled them both. One second, one thought, one motion. I remember in 1904—"

"Won't Mr. Lowrie have another piece of gingerbread?" asked the grandmother.

"Father, why don't you show Mr. Lowrie the apostles' spoons?" Bess proposed.

"What?" Her father stopped pacing. "Is Mr. Lowrie interested in old spoons?"

Lew was thinking at the moment of Amanda twisting somewhere between the glare of the tennis courts and the shadow of the veranda, through all the warmth and graciousness of the afternoon.

"Spoons? Oh, I've got a spoon, thank you."

"Apostles' spoons," Bess explained. "Father has one of the best collections in America. When he likes anybody enough he shows them the spoons. I thought, since you saved Amanda's life—"

He saw little of Amanda that afternoon—talked to her for a moment by the steps while a young man standing near tossed up a tennis racket and caught it by the handle with an impatient bend of his knees at each catch. The sun shopped among the yellow strands of her hair, poured around the rosy tan of her cheeks and spun along the arms that she regarded abstractedly as she talked to him.

"It's hard to thank a person for saving your life, Mr. Lowrie," she said. "Maybe you shouldn't have. Maybe it wasn't worth saving."

"Oh, yes, it was," said Lew, in a spasm of embarrassment.

"Well, I'd like to think so." She turned to the young man. "Was it, Allen?"

"It's a good enough life," Allen admitted, "if you go in for wooly blondes."

She turned her slender smile full upon Lew for a moment, and then aimed it a little aside, like a pocket torch that might dazzle him. "I'll always feel that you own me, Mr. Lowrie; my life is forfeit to you. You'll always have the right to take me back and put me down in front of that engine again."

Her proud mouth was a little overgracious about being saved, though Lew didn't realize it; it seemed to Amanda that it might at least have been someone in her own crowd. The Gunthers were a haughty family—haughty beyond all logic, because Mr. Gunther had once been presented at the Court of St. James's and remained slightly convalescent ever since. Even Bess was haughty, and it was Bess, eventually, who led Lew down to his car.

"It's a nice place," she agreed. "We've been going to modernize it, but we took a vote and decided to have the swimming pool repaired instead."

Lew's eyes lifted over her—she was like Amanda, except for the slightness of her and the childish disfigurement of a small wire across her teeth—up to the house with its decorative balconies outside the windows, its fickle gables, its gold-lettered, Swiss-chalet mottoes, the bulging projections of its many bays. Uncritically he regarded it; it seemed to him one of the finest houses he had ever known.

"Of course, we're miles from town, but there's always plenty of people. Father and mother go South after the Christmas holidays when we go back to school."

It was more than just a house, Lew decided as he drove away. It was a place where a lot of different things could go on at once—a private life for the older people, a private romance for each girl. Promoting himself, he chose his own corner—a swinging seat behind one of the drifts of vines that cut the veranda into quarters. But this was in 1925, when the ten thousand a year that Lew had come to command did not permit an indiscriminate crossing of social frontiers. He was received by the Gunthers and held at arm's length by them, and then gradually liked for the qualities that began to show through his awkwardness. A good-looking man on his way up can put directly into action the things he learns; Lew was never again quite so impressed by the suburban houses whose children lived upon rolling platforms in the street.

It was September before he was invited to the Gunthers' on an intimate scale—and this largely because Amanda's mother insisted upon it.

"He saved your life. I want him asked to this one little party."

But Amanda had not forgiven him for saving her life.

"It's just a dance for friends," she complained. "Let him come to Jean's debut in October—everybody'll think he's a business acquaintance of father's. After all, you can be nice to somebody without falling into their arms."

Mrs. Gunther translated this correctly as: "You can be awful to somebody without their knowing it"—and brusquely overrode her: "You can't have advantages without responsibilities," she said shortly.

Life had been opening up so fast for Lew that he had a black dinner coat instead of a purple one. Asked for dinner, he came early; and thinking to give him his share of attention when it was most convenient, Amanda walked with him into the tangled, out-of-hand garden. She wanted to be bored, but his gentle vitality disarmed her, made her look at him closely for almost the first time.

"I hear everywhere that you're a young man with a future," she said.

Lew admitted it. He boasted a little; he did not tell her that he had analyzed the spell which the Gunther house exerted upon him—his father had been gardener on a similar Maryland estate when he was a boy of five. His mother had helped him to remember that when he told her about the Gunthers. And now this garden was shot bright with sunset, with Amanda one of its own flowers in her flowered dress; he told her, in a rush of emotion, how beautiful she was, and Amanda, excited by the prospect of impending hours with another man, let herself encourage him. Lew had never been so happy as in the moment before she stood up from the seat and put her hand on his arm lightly.

"I do like you," she said. "You're very handsome. Do you know that?"

The harvest dance took place in an L-shaped space formed by the clearing of three rooms. Thirty young people were there, and a dozen of their elders, but there was no crowding, for the big windows were opened to the veranda and the guests danced against the wide, illimitable night. A country orchestra alternated with the phonograph, there was mildly calculated cider punch, and an air of safety beside the open bookshelves of the library and the oil portraits of the living room, as though this were one of an endless series of dances that had taken place here in the past and would take place again.

"Thought you never would cut in," Bess said to Lew. "You'd be foolish not to. I'm the best dancer of us three, and I'm much the smartest one. Jean is the jazzy one, the most chic, but I think it's passñ to be jazzy and play the traps and neck every second boy. Amanda is the beauty, of course. But I'm going to be the Cinderella, Mr. Lowrie. They'll be the two wicked sisters, and gradually you'll find I'm the most attractive and get all hot and bothered about me."

There was an interval of intervals before Lew could maneuver Amanda to his chosen segment of the porch. She was all radiant and shimmering. More than content to be with him, she tried to relax with the creak of the settee. Then instinct told her that something was about to happen.

Lew, remembering a remark of Jean's—"He asked me to marry him, and he hadn't even kissed me"—could yet think of no graceful way to assault Amanda; nevertheless he was determined to tell her tonight that he was in love with her.

"This'll seem sudden," he ventured, "but you might as well know. Please put me down on the list of those who'd like to have a chance."

She was not surprised, but being deep in herself at the moment, she was rather startled. Giving up the idea of relaxing, she sat upright.

"Mr. Lowrie—can I call you by your first name?—can I tell you something? No, I won't—yes, I will, because I like you now. I didn't like you at first. How's that for frankness?"

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"No. Listen. You met Mr. Horton—the man from New York—the tall man with the rather old-looking hair?"

"Yes." Lew felt a pang of premonition in his stomach.

"I'm engaged to him. You're the first to know—except mother suspects. Whee! Now I told you because you saved my life, so you do sort of own me—I wouldn't be here to be engaged, except for you." Then she was honestly surprised at his expression. "Heavens, don't look like that!" She regarded him, pained. "Don't tell me you've been secretly in love with me all these months. Why didn't I know? And now it's too late."

Lew tried a laugh.

"I hardly know you," he confessed. "I haven't had time to fall in love with you."

"Maybe I work quick. Anyhow, if you did, you'll have to forget it and be my friend." Finding his hand, she squeezed it. "A big night for this little girl, Mr. Lew; the chance of a lifetime. I've been afraid for two days that his bureau drawer would stick or the hot water would give out and he'd leave for civilization."

They were silent for a moment; then he asked:

"You very much in love with him?"

"Of course I am. I mean, I don't know. You tell me. I've been in love with so many people; how can I answer that? Anyhow, I'll get away from this old barn."

"This house? You want to get away from here? Why, this is a lovely old house."

She was astonished now, and then suddenly explosive:

"This old tomb! That's the chief reason I'm marrying George Horton. Haven't I stood it for twenty years? Haven't I begged mother and father on my knees to move into town? This—shack—where everybody can hear what everybody else says three rooms off, and father won't allow a radio, and not even a phone till last summer. I'm afraid even to ask a girl down from school—probably she'd go crazy listening to the shutters on a stormy night."

"It's a darn nice old house," he said automatically.

"Nice and quaint," she agreed. "Glad you like it. People who don't have to live here generally do, but you ought to see us alone in it—if there's a family quarrel you have to stay with it for hours. It all comes down to father wanting to live fifty miles from anywhere, so we're condemned to rot. I'd rather live in a three-room apartment in town!" Shocked by her own vehemence, she broke off. "Anyhow," she insisted, "it may seem nice to you, but it's a nuisance to us."

A man pulled the vines apart and peered at them, claimed her and pulled her to her feet; when she was gone, Lew went over the railing with a handhold and walked into the garden; he walked far enough away so that the lights and music from the house were blurred into one entity like a stage effect, like an approaching port viewed from a deck at night.

"I only saw her four times," he said to himself. "Four times isn't much. Eeney-meeneey-miney-moe—what could I expect in four times? I shouldn't feel anything at all." But he was engulfed by fear. What had he just begun to know that now he might never know? What had happened in these moments in the garden this afternoon, what was the excitement that had blacked out in the instant of its birth? The scarcely emergent young image of Amanda—he did not want to carry it

with him forever. Gradually he realized a truth behind his grief: He had come too late for her; unknown to him, she had been slipping away through the years. With the odds against him, he had managed to find himself on solid rock, and then, looking around for the girl, discovered that she had just gone. "Sorry, just gone out; just left; just gone." Too late in every way—even for the house. Thinking over her tirade, Lew saw that he had come too late for the house; it was the house of a childhood from which the three girls were breaking away, the house of an older generation, sufficient unto them. To a younger generation it was pervaded with an aura of completion and fulfillment beyond their own power to add to. It was just old.

Nevertheless, he recalled the emptiness of many grander mansions built in more spectacular fashions—empty to him, at any rate, since he had first seen the Gunther place three months before. Something humanly valuable would vanish with the break-up of this family. The house itself, designed for reading long Victorian novels around an open fire of the evening, didn't even belong to an architectural period worthy of restoration.

Lew circled an outer drive and stood quiet in the shadow of a rosebush as a pair of figures strolled down from the house; by their voices he recognized Jean and Allen Parks.

"Me, I'm going to New York," Jean said, "whether they let me or not... No, not now, you nut. I'm not in that mood."

"Then what mood are you in?"

"Not in any mood. I'm only envious of Amanda because she's hooked this M'sieur, and now she'll go to Long Island and live in a house instead of a mouse trap. Oh, Jake, this business of being simple and swell—"

They passed out of hearing. It was between dances, and Lew saw the colors of frocks and the quick white of shirt fronts in the window-panes as the guests flowed onto the porch. He looked up at the second floor as a light went on there—he had a conception of the second floor as walled with crowded photographs; there must be bags full of old materials, and trunks with costumes and dress-making forms, and old dolls' houses, and an overflow, everywhere along the vacant walls, of books for all generations—many childhoods side by side drifting into every corner.

Another couple came down the walk from the house, and feeling that inadvertently he had taken up too strategic a position, Lew moved away; but not before he had identified the pair as Amanda and her man from New York.

"What would you think if I told you I had another proposal tonight?"

"...be surprised at all."

"A very worthy young man. Saved my life... Why weren't you there on that occasion, Bubbles? You'd have done it on a grand scale, I'm sure."

Standing square in front of the house, Lew looked at it more searchingly. He felt a kinship with it—not precisely that, for the house's usefulness was almost over and his was just beginning; rather, the sense of superior unity that the thoughtful young feel for the old, sense of the grandparent. More than only a house. He would like to be that much used up himself before being thrown out on the ash heap at the end. And then, because he wanted to do some courteous service to it while he could, if only to dance with the garrulous little sister, he pulled a brash pocket comb through his hair and went inside.

II

The man with the smiling scar approached Lew once more.

"This is probably," he announced, "the biggest party ever given in New York."

"I even heard you the first time you told me," agreed Lew cheerfully.

"But, on the other hand," qualified the man, "I thought the same thing at a party two years ago, in 1927. Probably they'll go on getting bigger and bigger. You play polo, don't you?"

"Only in the back yard," Lewis assured him. "I said I'd like to play. I'm a serious business man."

"Somebody told me you were the polo star." The man was somewhat disappointed. "I'm a writer myself. A humani—a humanitarian. I've been trying to help out a girl over there in that room where the champagne is. She's a lady. And yet, by golly, she's the only one in the room that can't take care of herself."

"Never try to take care of anybody," Lew advised him. "They hate you for it."

But although the apartment, or rather the string of apartments and penthouses pressed into service for the affair, represented the best resources of the New York sky line, it was only limited metropolitan space at that, and moving among the swirls of dancers, thinned with dawn, Lew found himself finally in the chamber that the man had spoken of. For a moment he did not recognize the girl who had assumed the role of entertaining the glassy-eyed citizenry, chosen by natural selection to personify dissolution; then, as she issued a blanket invitation to a squad of Gaiety beauties to come south and recuperate on her Maryland estates, he recognized Jean Gunther.

She was the dark Gunther—dark and shining and driven. Lew, living in New York now, had seen none of the family since Amanda's marriage four years ago. Driving her home a quarter of an hour later, he extracted what news he could; and then left her in the dawn at the door of her apartment, mussed and awry, yet still proud, and tottering with absurd formality as she thanked him and said good night.

He called next afternoon and took her to tea in Central Park.

"I am," she informed him, "the child of the century. Other people claim to be the child of the century, but I'm actually the child of the century. And I'm having the time of my life at it."

Thinking back to another period—of young men on the tennis courts and hot buns in the afternoon, and of wistaria and ivy climbing along the ornate railings of a veranda—Lew became as moral as it was possible to be in that well-remembered year of 1929.

"What are you getting out of it? Why don't you invest in some reliable man—just a sort of background?"

"Men are good to invest money for you," she dodged neatly. "Last year one darling spun out my allowance so it lasted ten months instead of three."

"But how about marrying some candidate?"

"I haven't got any love," she said. "Actually, I know four—five—I know six millionaires I could maybe marry. This little girl from Carroll County. It's just too many. Now, if somebody that had everything came along—"

She looked at Lew appraisingly. "You've improved, for example."

"I should say I have," admitted Lew, laughing. "I even go to first nights. But the most beautiful thing about me is I remember my old friends, and among them are the lovely Gunther girls of Carroll County."

"You're very nice," she said. "Were you terribly in love with Amanda?"

"I thought so, anyhow."

"I saw her last week. She's super-Park Avenue and very busy having Park Avenue babies. She considers me rather disreputable and tells her friends about our magnificent plantation in the old South."

"Do you ever go down to Maryland?"

"Do I though? I'm going Sunday night, and spend two months there saving enough money to come back on. When mother died"—she paused—"I suppose you knew mother died—I came into a little cash, and I've still got it, but it has to be stretched, see?"—she pulled her napkin cornerwise—"by tactful investing. I think the next step is a quiet summer on the farm."

Lew took her to the theater the next night, oddly excited by the encounter. The wild flush of the times lay upon her; he was conscious of her physical pulse going at some abnormal rate, but most of the young women he knew were being hectic, save the ones caught up tight in domesticity.

He had no criticism to make—behind that lay the fact that he would not have dared to criticize her. Having climbed from a nether rung of the ladder, he had perforce based his standards on what he could see from where he was at the moment. Far be it from him to tell Jean Gunther how to order her life.

Getting off the train in Baltimore three weeks later, he stepped into the peculiar heat that usually preceded an electric storm. He passed up the regular taxis and hired a limousine for the long ride out to Carroll County, and as he drove through rich foliage, moribund in midsummer, between the white fences that lined the rolling road, many years fell away and he was again the young man, starved for a home, who had first seen the Gunther house four years ago. Since then he had occupied a twelve-room apartment in New York, rented a summer mansion on Long Island, but his spirit, warped by loneliness and grown gypsy with change, turned back persistently to this house.

Inevitably it was smaller than he had expected, a small, big house, roomy rather than spacious. There was a rather intangible neglect about it—the color of the house had never been anything but a brown-green relict of the sun; Lew had never known the stable to lean otherwise than as the Tower of Pisa, nor the garden to grow any other way than plebeian and wild.

Jean was on the porch—not, as she had prophesied, in the role of gingham queen or rural equestrienne, but very Rue-de-la-Paix against the dun cushions of the swinging settee. There was the stout, colored butler whom Lew remembered and who pretended, with racial guile, to remember Lew delightedly. He took the bag to Amanda's old room, and Lew stared around it a little before he went downstairs. Jean and Bess were waiting over a cocktail on the porch.

It struck him that Bess had made a leaping change out of childhood into something that was not quite youth. About her beauty there was a detachment, almost an impatience, as though she had not asked for the gift and considered it rather a burden; to a young man, the gravity of her face might have seemed formidable.

"How is your father?" Lew asked.

"He won't be down tonight," Bess answered. "He's not well. He's over seventy, you know. People tire him. When we have guests, he has dinner upstairs."

"It would be better if he ate upstairs all the time," Jean remarked, pouring the cocktails.

"No, it wouldn't," Bess contradicted her. "The doctors said it wouldn't. There's no question about that."

Jean turned in a rush to Lew. "For over a year Bess has hardly left this house. We could—"

"What junk!" her sister said impatiently. "I ride every morning."

"—we could get a nurse who would do just as well."

Dinner was formal, with candles on the table and the two young women in evening dresses. Lew saw that much was missing—the feeling that the house was bursting with activity, with expanding life—all this had gone. It was difficult for the diminished clan to do much more than inhabit the house. There was not a moving up into vacated places; there was simply an anachronistic staying on between a vanishing past and an incalculable future.

Midway through dinner, Lew lifted his head at a pause in the conversation, but what he had confused with a mutter of thunder was a long groan from the floor above, followed by a measured speech, whose words were interrupted by the quick clatter of Bess' chair.

"You know what I ordered. Just so long as I am the head of—"

"It's father." Momentarily Jean looked at Lew as if she thought the situation was faintly humorous, but at his concerned face, she continued seriously, "You might as well know. It's senile dementia. Not dangerous. Sometimes he's absolutely himself. But it's hard on Bess."

Bess did not come down again; after dinner, Lew and Jean went into the garden, splattered with faint drops before the approaching rain. Through the vivid green twilight Lew followed her long dress, spotted with bright red roses—it was the first of that fashion he had ever seen; in the tense hush he had an illusion of intimacy with her, as though they shared the secrets of many years and, when she caught at his arm suddenly at a rumble of thunder, he drew her around slowly with his other arm and kissed her shaped, proud mouth.

"Well, at least you've kissed one Gunther girl," Jean said lightly. "How was it? And don't you think you're taking advantage of us, being unprotected out here in the country?"

He looked at her to see if she were joking, and with a swift laugh she seized his arm again. It was raining in earnest, and they fled toward the house—to find Bess on her knees in the library, setting light to an open fire.

"Father's all right," she assured them. "I don't like to give him the medicine till the last minute. He's worrying about some man that lent him twenty dollars in 1892." She lingered, conscious of being a third party, and yet impelled to play her mother's role and impart an initial solidarity before she retired. The storm broke, shrieking in white at the windows, and Bess took the opportunity to fly to the windows upstairs, calling down after a moment:

"The telephone's trying to ring. Do you think it's safe to answer it?"

"Perfectly," Jean called back, "or else they wouldn't ring." She came close to Lewis in the center of the room, away from the white, quivering windows.

"It's strange having you here right now. I don't mind saying I'm glad you're here. But if you weren't, I suppose we'd get along just as well."

"Shall I help Bess close the windows?" Lew asked.

Simultaneously, Bess called downstairs:

"Nobody seemed to be on the phone, and I don't like holding it."

A ripping crash of thunder shook the house and Jean moved into Lew's arm, breaking away as Bess came running down the stairs with a yelp of dismay.

"The lights are out up there," she said. "I never used to mind storms when I was little. Father used to make us sit on the porch sometimes, remember?"

There was a dazzle of light around all the windows of the first floor, reflecting itself back and forth in mirrors, so that every room was pervaded with a white glare; there followed a sound as of a million matches struck at once, so loud and terrible that the thunder rolling down seemed secondary; then a splintering noise separated itself out, and Bess' voice:

"That struck!"

Once again came the sickening lightning, and through a rolling pandemonium of sound they groped from window to window till Jean cried: "It's William's room! There's a tree on it!"

In a moment, Lew had flung wide the kitchen door and saw, in the next glare, what had happened: The great tree, in falling, had divided the lean-to from the house proper.

"Is William there?" he demanded.

"Probably. He should be."

Gathering up his courage, Lew dashed across the twenty feet of new marsh, and with a waffle iron smashed in the nearest window. Inundated with sheet rain and thunder, he yet realized that the storm had moved off from overhead, and his voice was strong as he called: "William! You all right?"

No answer.

"William!"

He paused and there came a quiet answer:

"Who dere?"

"You all right?"

"I wanna know who dere."

"The tree fell on you. Are you hurt?"

There was a sudden peal of laughter from the shack as William emerged mentally from dark and atavistic suspicions of his own. Again and again the pealing laughter rang out.

"Hurt? Not me hurt. Nothin' hurt me. I'm never better, as they say. Nothin' hurt me."

Irritated by his melting clothes, Lew said brusquely:

"Well, whether you know it or not, you're penned up in there. You've got to try and get out this window. That tree's too big to push off tonight."

Half an hour later, in his room, Lew shed the wet pulp of his clothing by the light of a single candle. Lying naked on the bed, he regretted that he was in poor condition, unnecessarily fatigued with the exertion of pulling a fat man out a window. Then, over the dull rumble of the thunder he heard the phone again in the hall, and Bess' voice, "I can't hear a word. You'll have to get a better connection," and for thirty seconds he dozed, to wake with a jerk at the sound of his door opening.

"Who's that?" he demanded, pulling the quilt up over himself.

The door opened slowly.

"Who's that?"

There was a chuckle; a last pulse of lightning showed him three tense, blue-veined fingers, and then a man's voice whispered: "I only wanted to know whether you were in for the night, dear. I worry—I worry."

The door closed cautiously, and Lew realized that old Gunther was on some nocturnal round of his own. Aroused, he slipped into his sole change of clothes, listening to Bess for the third time at the phone.

"—in the morning," she said. "Can't it wait? We've got to get a connection ourselves."

Downstairs he found Jean surprisingly spritely before the fire. She made a sign to him, and he went and stood above her, indifferent suddenly to her invitation to kiss her. Trying to decide how he felt, he brushed his hand lightly along her shoulder.

"Your father's wandering around. He came in my room. Don't you think you ought to—"

"Always does it," Jean said. "Makes the nightly call to see if we're in bed."

Lew stared at her sharply; a suspicion that had been taking place in his subconscious assumed tangible form. A bland, beautiful expression stared back at him; but his ears lifted suddenly up the stairs to Bess still struggling with the phone.

"All right. I'll try to take it that way... P-ay-double ess-ee-dee-'p-a-s-s-e-d.' All right; ay-double you-ay-wy. 'Passed away?'" Her voice, as she put the phrase together, shook with sudden panic. "What did you say—'Amanda Gunther passed away'?"

Jean looked at Lew with funny eyes.

"Why does Bess try to take that message now? Why not—"

"Shut up!" he ordered. "This is something serious."

"I don't see—"

Alarmed by the silence that seeped down the stairs, Lew ran up and found Bess sitting beside the telephone table holding the receiver in her lap, just breathing and staring, breathing and staring. He took the receiver and got the message:

"Amanda passed away quietly, giving life to a little boy."

Lew tried to raise Bess from the chair, but she sank back, full of dry sobbing.

"Don't tell father tonight."

How did it matter if this was added to that old store of confused memories? It mattered to Bess, though.

"Go away," she whispered. "Go tell Jean."

Some premonition had reached Jean, and she was at the foot of the stairs while he descended.

"What's the matter?"

He guided her gently back into the library.

"Amanda is dead," he said, still holding her.

She gathered up her forces and began to wail, but he put his hand over her mouth.

"You've been drinking!" he said. "You've got to pull yourself together. You can't put anything more on your sister."

Jean pulled herself together visibly—first her proud mouth and then her whole body—but what might have seemed heroic under other conditions seemed to Lew only reptilian, a fine animal effort—all he had begun to feel about her went out in a few ticks of the clock.

In two hours the house was quiet under the simple ministrations of a retired cook whom Bess had sent for; Jean was put to sleep with a sedative by a physician from Ellicott City. It was only when Lew was in bed at last that he thought really of Amanda, and broke suddenly, and only for a moment. She was gone out of the world, his second—no, his third love—killed in single combat. He thought rather of the dripping garden outside, and nature so suddenly innocent in the clearing night. If he had not been so tired he would have dressed and walked through the long-stemmed, clinging ferns, and looked once more impersonally at the house and its inhabitants—the broken old, the youth breaking and growing old with it, the other youth escaping into dissipation. Walking through broken dreams, he came in his imagination to where the falling tree had divided William's bedroom from the house, and paused there in the dark shadow, trying to piece together what he thought about the Gunthers.

"It's degenerate business," he decided—"all this hanging on to the past. I've been wrong. Some of us are going ahead, and these people and the roof over them are just push-overs for time. I'll be glad to leave it for good and get back to something fresh and new and clean in Wall Street tomorrow."

Only once was he wakened in the night, when he heard the old man quavering querulously about the twenty dollars that he had borrowed in '92. He heard Bess' voice soothing him, and then, just before he went to sleep, the voice of the old Negress blotting out both voices.

III

Lew's business took him frequently to Baltimore, but with the years it seemed to change back into the Baltimore that he had known before he met the Gunthers. He thought of them often, but after the night of Amanda's death he never went there. By 1933, the role that the family had played in his life seemed so remote—except for the unforgettable fact that they had formed his ideas about how life was lived—that he could drive along the Frederick Road to where it dips into Carroll County before a feeling of recognition crept over him. Impelled by a formless motive, he stopped his car.

It was deep summer; a rabbit crossed the road ahead of him and a squirrel did acrobatics on an arched branch. The Gunther house was up the next crossroad and five minutes away—in half an hour he could satisfy his curiosity about the family; yet he hesitated. With painful consequences, he had once tried to repeat the past, and now, in normal times, he would have driven on with a feeling of leaving the past well behind him; but he had come to realize recently that life was not always a progress, nor a search for new horizons, nor a going away. The Gunthers were part of him; he would not be able to bring to new friends the exact things that he had brought to the Gunthers. If the memory of them became extinct, then something in himself became extinct also.

The squirrel's flight on the branch, the wind nudging at the leaves, the cock

splitting distant air, the creep of sunlight transpiring through the immobility, lulled him into an adolescent trance, and he sprawled back against the leather for a moment without problems. He loafed for ten minutes before the "k-dup, k-dup, k-dup" of a walking horse came around the next bend of the road. The horse bore a girl in Jodhpur breeches, and bending forward, Lew recognized Bess Gunther.

He scrambled from the car. The horse shied as Bess recognized Lew and pulled up. "Why, Mr. Lowrie! ... Hey! Hoo-oo there, girl! ... Where did you arrive from? Did you break down?"

It was a lovely face, and a sad face, but it seemed to Lew that some new quality made it younger—as if she had finally abandoned the cosmic sense of responsibility which had made her seem older than her age four years ago.

"I was thinking about you all," he said. "Thinking of paying you a visit." Detecting a doubtful shadow in her face, he jumped to a conclusion and laughed. "I don't mean a visit; I mean a call. I'm solvent—sometimes you have to add that these days."

She laughed too: "I was only thinking the house was full and where would we put you."

"I'm bound for Baltimore anyhow. Why not get off your rocking horse and sit in my car a minute."

She tied the mare to a tree and got in beside him.

He had not realized that flashing fairness could last so far into the twenties—only when she didn't smile, he saw from three small thoughtful lines that she was always a grave girl—he had a quick recollection of Amanda on an August afternoon, and looking at Bess, he recognized all that he remembered of Amanda.

"How's your father?"

"Father died last year. He was bedridden a year before he died." Her voice was in the singsong of something often repeated. "It was just as well."

"I'm sorry. How about Jean? Where is she?"

"Jean married a Chinaman—I mean she married a man who lives in China. I've never seen him."

"Do you live alone, then?"

"No, there's my aunt." She hesitated. "Anyhow, I'm getting married next week."

Inexplicably, he had the old sense of loss in his diaphragm.

"Congratulations! Who's the unfortunate—"

"From Philadelphia. The whole party went over to the races this afternoon. I wanted to have a last ride with Juniper."

"Will you live in Philadelphia?"

"Not sure. We're thinking of building another house on the place, tear down the old one. Of course, we might remodel it."

"Would that be worth doing?"

"Why not?" she said hastily. "We could use some of it, the architects think."

"You're fond of it, aren't you?"

Bess considered.

"I wouldn't say it was just my idea of modernity. But I'm a sort of a home girl." She accentuated the words ironically. "I never went over very big in Baltimore, you know—the family failure. I never had the sort of thing Amanda and Jean had."

"Maybe you didn't want it."

"I thought I did when I was young."

The mare neighed peremptorily and Bess backed out of the car.

"So that's the story, Lew Lowrie, of the last Gunther girl. You always did have a sort of yen for us, didn't you?"

"Didn't I! If I could possibly stay in Baltimore, I'd insist on coming to your wedding."

At the lost expression on her face, he wondered to whom she was handing herself, a very precious self. He knew more about people now, and he felt the steel beneath the softness in her, the girders showing through the gentle curves of cheek and chin. She was an exquisite person, and he hoped that her husband would be a good man.

When she had ridden off into a green lane, he drove tentatively toward Baltimore. This was the end of a human experience and it released old images that regrouped themselves about him—if he had married one of the sisters; supposing—The past, slipping away under the wheels of his car, crunched awake his acuteness.

"Perhaps I was always an intruder in that family... But why on earth was that girl riding in bedroom slippers?"

At the crossroads store he stopped to get cigarettes. A young clerk searched the case with country slowness.

"Big wedding up at the Gunther place," Lew remarked.

"Hah? Miss Bess getting married?"

"Next week. The wedding party's there now."

"Well, I'll be dog! Wonder what they're going to sleep on, since Mark H. Bourne took the furniture away?"

"What's that? What?"

"Month ago Mark H. Bourne took all the furniture and everything else while Miss Bess was out riding—they mortgaged on it just before Gunther died. They say around here she ain't got a stitch except them riding clothes. Mark H. Bourne was good and sore. His claim was they sold off all the best pieces of furniture without his knowing it... Now, that's ten cents I owe you."

"What do she and her aunt live on?"

"Never heard about an aunt—I only been here a year. She works the truck garden herself; all she buys from us is sugar, salt and coffee."

Anything was possible these times, yet Lew wondered what incredibly fantastic pride had inspired her to tell that lie.

He turned his car around and drove back to the Gunther place. It was a

desperately forlorn house he came to, and a jungled garden; one side of the veranda had slipped from the brick pillars and sloped to the ground; a shingle job, begun and abandoned, rotted paintless on the roof, a broken pane gaped from the library window.

Lew went in without knocking. A voice challenged him from the dining room and he walked toward it, his feet loud on the rugless floor, through rooms empty of stick and book, empty of all save casual dust. Bess Gunther, wearing the cheapest of house dresses, rose from the packing box on which she sat, with fright in her eyes; a tin spoon rattled on the box she was using as a table.

"Have you been kidding me?" he demanded. "Are you actually living like this?"

"It's you." She smiled in relief; then, with visible effort, she spurred herself into amenities:

"Take a box, Mr. Lowrie. Have a canned-goods box—they're superior; the grain is better. And welcome to the open spaces. Have a cigar, a glass of champagne, have some rabbit stew and meet my fiancé."

"Stop that."

"All right," she agreed.

"Why didn't you go and live with some relatives?"

"Haven't got any relatives. Jean's in China."

"What are you doing? What do you expect to happen?"

"I was waiting for you, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"You always seemed to turn up. I thought if you turned up, I'd make a play for you. But when it came to the point, I thought I'd better lie. I seem to lack the S.A. my sisters had."

Lew pulled her up from the box and held her with his fingers by her waist.

"Not to me."

In the hour since Lew had met her on the road the vitality seemed to have gone out of her; she looked up at him very tired.

"So you liked the Gunthers," she whispered. "You liked us all."

Lew tried to think, but his heart beat so quick that he could only sit her back on the box and pace along the empty walls.

"We'll get married," he said. "I don't know whether I love you—I don't even know you—I know the notion of your being in want or trouble makes me physically sick." Suddenly he went down on both knees in front of her so that she would not seem so unbearably small and helpless. "Miss Bess Gunther, so it was you I was meant to love all the while."

"Don't be so anxious about it," she laughed. "I'm not used to being loved. I wouldn't know what to do; I never got the trick of it." She looked down at him, shy and fatigued. "So here we are. I told you years ago that I had the makings of Cinderella."

He took her hand; she drew it back instinctively and then replaced it in his. "Beg your pardon. Not even used to being touched. But I'm not afraid of you, if you stay quiet and don't move suddenly."

It was the same old story of reserve Lew could not fathom, motives reaching back into a past he did not share. With the three girls, facts seemed to reveal themselves precipitately, pushing up through the gay surface; they were always unsuspected things, currents and predilections alien to a man who had been able to shoot in a straight line always.

"I was the conservative sister," Bess said. "I wasn't any less pleasure loving but with three girls, somebody has to play the boy, and gradually that got to be my part... Yes, touch me like that. Touch my cheek. I want to be touched; I want to be held. And I'm glad it's you; but you've got to go slow; you've got to be careful. I'm afraid I'm the kind of person that's forever. I'll live with you and die for you, but I never knew what halfway meant... Yes, that's the wrist. Do you like it? I've had a lot of fun looking at myself in the last month, because there's one long mirror upstairs that was too big to take out."

Lew stood up. "All right, we'll start like that. I'll be so healthy that I'll make you all healthy again."

"Yes, like that," she agreed.

"Suppose we begin by setting fire to this house."

"Oh, no!" She took him seriously. "In the first place, it's insured. In the second place—"

"All right, we'll just get out. We'll get married in Baltimore, or Ellicott City if you'd rather."

"How about Juniper? I can't go off and leave her."

"We'll leave her with the young man at the store."

"The house isn't mine. It's all mortgaged away, but they let me live here—I guess it was remorse after they took even our old music, and our old scrapbooks. They didn't have a chance of getting a tenant, anyhow."

Minute by minute, Lew found out more about her, and liked what he found, but he saw that the love in her was all incrustated with the sacrificial years, and that he would have to be gardener to it for a while. The task seemed attractive.

"You lovely," he told her. "You lovely! We'll survive, you and I because you're so nice and I'm so convinced about it."

"And about Juniper—will she survive if we go away like this?"

"Juniper too."

She frowned and then smiled—and this time really smiled—and said: "Seems to me, you're falling in love."

"Speak for yourself. My opinion is that this is going to be the best thing ever happened."

"I'm going to help. I insist on—"

They went out together—Bess changed into her riding habit, but there wasn't another article that she wanted to bring with her. Backing through the clogging weeds of the garden, Lew looked at the house over his shoulder. "Next week or so we'll decide what to do about that."

It was a bright sunset—the creep of rosy light that played across the blue fenders of the car and across their crazily happy faces moved across the house too—across the paralyzed door of the ice house, the rusting tin gutters, the

loose-swinging shutter, the cracked cement of the front walk, the burned place of last year's rubbish back of the tennis court. Whatever its further history, the whole human effort of collaboration was done now. The purpose of the house was achieved—finished and folded—it was an effort toward some commonweal, an effort difficult to estimate, so closely does it press against us still.