

THE TREE - 003

Sometimes Nat grated his fingers instead of Mrs. Babb's cocoanut, but he didn't mind. If it burned him very badly and Mrs. Babb was not in the kitchen he would push the damaged members in his mouth and suck them with a swift, stolen gesture, liking the sweet, milky taste of the cocoanut mingled with the rawish, salty taste of his own blood. But he only did this if Mrs. Babb was not in the room. When she was there he would just blow on the bruises and, taking a fresh, safer grip on the bit of cocoanut, continue grating, even though the blood showed red through the white pith of the nut upon his hands.

Nat was not too well grown for his eight years. In manner he was quiet and subdued, with a soberness beyond his years. When he looked at you you seemed to see all the pensive sensitiveness of his young soul mirrored in his big earnest eyes. There was still a peaked, undernourished look upon him, an inheritance of his first five years of life, when, the bastard child of a poor, ailing, consumptive domestic, he had hardly ever known the well-being of a full belly. Then, at last, death had put an end to his mother's blighted, hand-to-mouth struggle for food for herself and her child and Nat had been sent to the Catholic Orphanage. Now he had been there three years, and had grown to love the patient, gentle plainness of Mother Delphine's face. A face, as Nat knew, that could frown with a petrifying sternness, or smile with an understanding, holy love that won children's hearts for ever.

Every evening, with the exception of Sundays, when the lessons at the Orphanage were done and the children had had their evening meal, Nat would slide shyly up where Mother Delphine stood watching the last stragglers eating, and rub his feet against each other to attract her attention. Suddenly Mother Delphine would turn and look at him, making pretence of noticing him for the first time. Nat would feel the blood surging from over his whole body to his face, until the nun smiled and gave an almost imperceptible inclination of the head. Immediately the boy turned away and walking quickly, with eager restraint, through the room, broke into a trot the moment he reached the threshold and running through the gates, did the hundred yards to Mrs. Babb's house in a matter of seconds.

This unsupervised furlough from the Orphanage was a privilege which Mother Delphine afforded but one or two of the children, when she was certain of where and how the time was spent. She was a tactful, saint-hearted woman, and she was glad when her little wards could make friends beyond the narrow confines of the Orphanage. She had known Mrs. Babb for years, as the woman did some of the washing at the Orphanage, and though they were by no means of the same faith, she knew no moral harm would come to the little boy in that pious, God-fearing mission-goer's home.

Mrs. Babb was a tall, dry woman, with peace and the fear of God lighting her otherwise rather long and mulish face. If you had asked her

what she did for a living, she would have told you that she 'did up' a few clothes with the mercy of God, meaning that she took in washing. But 'to get along' as she put it, she also sold fruit in a tray placed on a box upon her front doorstep. Along with the fruit she sold sugar cakes—grated cocoanut boiled in sugar and dropped upon a board to harden—and bits of broken cocoanut boiled to a brown succulence. She usually washed late into the evening, and when she had finished her washing, she came into her kitchen and turned about, preparing her evening tea. And as she turned about she sang her favourite missionary hymns, one after the other, while Nat grated and listened, or if there wasn't any cocoanut to be grated he just sat and listened, following her with his intelligent, serious eyes. Some of the hymns she sang struck a well of sweet inexplicable melancholy in the boy's thoughtful, imaginative nature, sensitive as a harp's string. There was one especially that raised a lump in his throat when Mrs. Babb waded into the chorus in her harsh, cracked-bell yet soulful tones:

'Then my soul-I-I-I
Shall fear no ill,
Let him lead-d-d-d
Me where he will;
I will go-o-o-o
Without a murmur,
And his footsteps follow still."

Nat sat on a bench, the washing pan and grater on the bench before

him between his straddled legs. Mrs. Babb was still outside at her washing. As Nat grated he put the ends of cocoanut on a piece of brown paper upon the low dresser beside him.

By the time he had finished the cocoanut Mrs. Babb had come into the low, dark box that served her for a kitchen, and was stirring about preparing her evening tea. Nat lifted the washing pan from the bench and placed it upon the dresser, and after a time coughed politely to attract Mrs. Babb's attention. The woman glanced at him, and going into the shedroof that gave onto the kitchen, she opened a larder and took out a bottle of brown sugar. Scooping out a quantity of the sugar with the fingers of her right hand, she brought it back into the kitchen and deposited it upon the piece of paper with the ends of cocoanut. Nat separated the ends and the sugar carefully, and tearing the paper carefully down in two, skewered the sugar and ends into two parcels. Holding open his shirt pocket with his left hand, he dropped the two small parcels in one after the other. This done, he turned and went through the door of the kitchen into the yard, where a mahogany tree dominated the whole of the small space. Beneath the tree was a tub placed on a box where Mrs. Babb did her washing. Nat made a platform of an edge of the box, and hugging the bole of the tree between his arms and his knees, shinned up the first few feet until he reached the first branch. After that it was easy.

He reached his favourite seat, a fork high up in the tree where the trunk resolved into two divergent branches, and where, a few inches

down, a third branch grew out upon which he could stand erect or rest his feet as he liked. Sitting down, he took the parcels from his pocket and opened them. Spreading the ends of cocoanut carefully in the cup of his lap he began to eat, dipping each piece before putting it into his mouth, into the parcel of sugar which he held in his left hand.

As he ate, he could see far over the surrounding country, spread out before him like an open book. Near at hand he could see the black, shingled roofs, and he took a childish delight in being able to see into the paled-in yards of Mrs. Babb's neighbours. Farther away he could see the ragged fields of canes, the green baize of potato fields, and roads winding like white ribbons away into the misty, settling dusk. Away, miles before him, he could see a man upon a horse-drawn cart, shrunken by distance to the size of a toy dray which he had back at the Orphanage, growing even smaller and more indistinct with every second. Behind him, if he cared to look back, he could look down at the other children playing at the Orphanage. But mostly he kept his head twisted to the left, where the last golden haze of sunset was flouncing the blue rim of sea, and where the red walls of the prison rose up to remind him of Mrs. Babb's words, of how her son was there.

Nat had to be back at the Orphanage by Vesper bell, which rang at the nearby Convent at six o'clock. But on Mondays and Wednesdays, the days Mrs. Babb went to her evening service, he was allowed to stay out somewhat later, as an understanding had sprung up between

Mother Delphine and Mrs. Babb that Mrs. Babb would drop the little boy off at the gates of the Orphanage on her way to church. It was usually on these evenings, when Mrs. Babb stood dressed in the rusty black she always wore to meeting, that she told Nat of the misfortune that had befallen her son. Nat would be sitting sedately on a chair in that part of the divided front room that Mrs. Babb thought of and referred to as the drawing-room. After a time, Ms. Babb would emerge from the other division—the bedroom—dressed in her black and settling the bib at her deflated bosom. When this was done to her satisfaction she would go to a small mahogany desk set in a corner, and pull out the single drawer, in which she kept her heavy, leather-bound bible and her hymn book. Her eye would fall upon an old newspaper she kept there, and the same old ritual would ensue, until Nat knew every word and gesture by heart, so often had it been enacted. After standing stock still, looking down at the paper as though she wondered what it was doing there, Mrs. Babb would take it out of the drawer and crease out its folds upon the top of the desk.

“Lud give me grace when I think o’ me Robie,” she would say, with just the slightest trace of heat, “Lud still my heart when I think o’ how they’s got me own boy a-pining away the best years o’ his life. But thank the good Lud, Mr. Nat, little son, thank the good Lud it weren’t for nothing shameful nor low-depraved what they’s got him there for, though it were as unjust as Jesus on the cross what they sent him to jail for.

Listen to this Mr. Nat, little son, listen to this what the devils said o' me good lad. But don't ye ever believe a word o' it. Don't ye ever believe a word o' it, for me Robie were the soberest, gentlest lad, whatever put foot to God's ground, and all what they says were a passel o' lies. But I'll read ye, Mr. Nat, I'll read ye just the same." Reaching out above her, she would take her old, beaded handbag from where it hung, slung over one of the highest prongs of the hatrack over the desk, and opening it with a click of its metal fastener, take out a pair of twisted, gold-rimmed spectacles and set them on her nose. Opening the paper she would turn the pages one by one, passing her right forefinger down the columns of each page until she came to a paragraph boxed in red ink.

'Here's what they said o' me Robie," she would repeat, fixing the paragraph with her right forefinger. "But don't ye ever believe a word o' it little son, don't ye ever believe a word o' it, d'ye hear?"

Clearing her throat, she would peer over her spectacles at Nat for a moment, with a sharp, sideways glance, before she started to read in affected, judicial tones, substituting her favourite ye-s which she had copped from her bible and following the words with her finger.

" 'Prisoner at the bar,' " she read, darting a last swift, intimidating glance at Nat, "this court has found ye guilty of reckless and criminal driving. Your learned counsel has submitted a plea for lenience on account of your youth and palpable remorse. But ye have been found guilty of a serious and ever growing more prevalent offence.

Through your reckless irresponsibility, ye have wantonly sent a poor man, wending his way home, to an untimely death. This man leaves behind him a poor wife and five children of tender ages. Who will provide for them now that he is gone? Ye and those who handle vehicles like ye must know that the roads are meant for sober, capable citizens, and not for fanatical madhats athirst after speed. This court can do no less than impose a sentence of ten years' penal servitude."

Refolding the paper and dropping back into her broad, careless country dialect, she would add, taking off her spectacles and replacing them in her bag:

"Lud give, me patience to stomach them harsh words o' me Robie. But thank the good Father there ain't one ounce o' honest truth in them, for they's the biggest paasel o' lies that ever come out o' a sinner's throat, And don't ye ever believe it little son. Let's away to the meeting."

Replacing the paper carefully in the drawer, she would take out her bible and hymn book, and slinging her handbag and parasol over her left arm, blow down the chimney of the oil lamp that lit the apartment, and letting Nat go before her, hustled him gently toward the door. On the threshold she turned, and fumbling in her handbag for her key, pulled to and locked the solid inside door behind her, while the outside panel door she merely put on the latch, and together, they set out through the deepening dusk.

When Nat finished his cocoanut, he licked the remainder of the pinch

of sugar which he had carefully eked out and reserved for this purpose from the paper, to the last grain. Then he tore the two pieces of paper into smaller pieces and rolled them into balls, dropping them, one by one, through the leaves into the white, soapy water down in Mrs. Babb's tub. When his stock of 'bombs' were exhausted he stood up upon the branch at his feet and took a last look round upon the surrounding scene, preparing to climb down from his perch. The last crimson flounce of sunset edging the sea had now turned ashen; the burnished, crystal sky was fast becoming opaque as night flowed into the lucent, transparent emptiness between earth and sky, and darkness would soon fall like a blow.

Nat slithered down the last few feet, clutching the rough bark for dear life, yet careful to avoid hurting the vines that clung to the trunk, twisting their way up into the tree; for Nat himself had planted them in Mrs. Babb's yard.

Years before, one day when Nat had gone into the woods, he had stood enchanted and awestruck, for far and wide, the trees were gay with golden-yellow flowers. Thick and trodden, they littered the ground wherever the eye turned, as though a golden carpet had been spread there, while every tree had its thick mantle of gold. At first Nat had thought that the trees all bore these flowers, and he had watched Mrs. Babb's mahogany tree with anxious expectancy, certain that it would in time don its rich, golden, breath-taking bloom too. But year after year passed, and while, every year, the trees in the woods bloomed,

Mrs. Babb's tree remained sombre in its uninspiring, smoky, rusty-green garb. At last, the year before, he had taken the matter in shy, puzzled disappointment to Mother Delphine, and she had explained that it was not the trees that bore these flowers, but a creeper vine which infested them called cloth-of-gold. So Nat had dug up strands of the vine from the woods, and had transplanted them at the foot of Mrs. Babb's tree. Two or three had taken root, and had climbed their way into the branches.

All Nat's life he had been under the influence of pious, praying women. His mother, who had deteriorated into a maudlin, spineless sycophant before her death, and now Mother Delphine with her beads. Therefore it was only natural that the boy from his earliest years had fallen into the habit of muttering the slightest petitions to Heaven. That evening, as he slithered down the tree and let his feet sink down in the water in Mrs. Babb's tub until they reached the bottom, he stood ankle-deep in the thick, spummy water and looked up, hugging the tree, his chin pressed against its bole, and said:

“Please Jesus, please let my tree bear. Please let my tree bear cloth-of-gold flowers like the trees in the woods”

Jumping from the water over the rim of the tub on to the ground, he ran through the yard and started on his run back to the Orphanage as the Vesper bell started its solemn beat.

One evening, as Nat came through the gate into Mrs. Babb's yard, he saw Nice, Mrs. Babb's daughter, standing beside her mother who was washing at her tub under the tree.

Nice worked out in business. In other words she was a maid servant who lived in. Once in a while, about three or four times a month, she would appear of an evening and sleep the night with her mother. She was a tall, well set up girl with plump cheeks and full, humid lips, chock full of gay, cascading, sensual laughter and high spirits.

Suddenly she turned, and catching sight of Nat, she ran across the yard and caught him up in her arms into the air, kissing him again and again upon the mouth. Then, putting him down, she squatted before him, and hugging him tight, pressed her cheeks, right and left, again and again into his own. Snatching him up again, she bore him in her arms along the yard and through the door of the kitchen, and deposited him on the bench upon which he usually sat before the low dresser, before a dish of started food. Flinging herself down beside him and squeezing him into her side she started to feed him, all in a silent, frenzied passion of affection.

Nat was accustomed to Nice's fits of affection, but this evening, although he accepted her petting with all his usual docile, childish matter-of-factness, the sweet, exultant joy of her tumultuous affection enveloped him more than ever in its warm glow, and he nestled closer into her side as he ate.

After a time Nice said, gurgling her laughter:

"No. No. You're my little man what I'm going to marry, nuh, nuh? You're my little man and you'll feed me, nuh, nuh?"

Pressing the spoon into his hand, she poked her face forward, her mouth agape with laughter and expectation. Nat could see right inside,

the white, flawless teeth and moist, cherry pulpiness of her throat her breath fell full into his face, and he liked its warm, herbish flavour, like the smell that clung to him after he had lain for an hour in the field aback of the Orphanage.

Nat ate quietly, putting a spoonful of food into her mouth whenever she poked her face into his.

When they had finished the food Nat said:

“My tree’s going to bear cloth-of-gold like the trees in the woods. I’ve asked God.”

Nice’s laughter cascaded over him, as she buried her face in his light, brownish hair.

“And you’ll be my little man and bring me a garland of cloth-of-gold on my wedding day, nuh, nuh?” she giggled, breaking into singing in her true, clear voice, like a bird’s; rocking him to the tune:

“A garland, a garland,
Of blossoms fresh and fair;
A garland, a garland
We’ll twine for Spring to wear;
With buttercups entwining,
The bluebell shall be there,
And hawthorn buds, all shining
With dewdrops fresh and clear.”

Mrs. Babb came into the kitchen and stood watching them for a while. Then she said:

“Nice I’ve got it. I hardly done put it to the Saviour, and he’s answered

me right away. Lud knows it's been a useful tree to me, with its shade and seeds and what not, but it'll have to go just the same, same as the best o' us. It'll have to go so's ye can wed Jim as any decent gel should and not face the temptation o' living in sin."

Nice sprang up from the bench beside Nat, did a pirouette on the floor of the kitchen, and running to the door, stood beside her mother, looking at the tree as though it had sprung up overnight. Then throwing her arms about her mother's neck she kissed her sunken, angular cheeks again and again in an ecstasy of delight.

"Oh Mum, Mum," she exulted, "It'll give me my dress and my veil and what not. Proute the joiner'll be glad to buy it."

Nat's heart contracted, then turned heavy and leaden as it resumed its sluggish beat, while all his feeling surged up to be cooped and bursting in his breast.

Slipping quietly from the bench, he passed through the kitchen door between the two women out into the yard. When the house hid him on his way to the gate he stopped, and putting his palms on his knees, stood crouched as though he wanted to empty his stomach.

Oh please Jesus, they wanted to sell his tree, with his cloth-of-gold vine and where he sits of an evening and watches the sunset and the sea, and the fields, and the little toy carts, and the prison where Mrs. Babb's son was. Oh Jesus, please Jesus don't let them do it. Please Jesus let Jim die, so that Nice won't have to marry him anymore, nor need any dresses nor shoes nor veil, and let his tree stay, please Jesus.

That was what Nat would have liked to say. What he said was: "Please Jesus don't let me be sick. Please don't let me throw up my dinner."

When he had said so he felt better. Straightening, he passed through the gate and started his sad walk back to the Orphanage.

The days that followed were long with suffering for him. Sensitive and uncommunicative, he hugged the fear of his threatened loss to him, wretchedness finding lush pasture in the shy, pensive taciturnity of his nature. His mind strayed from his lessons, impatient for the evening hour when, with eager, yet fearful dread, he ran the distance to Mrs. Babb's home. When he saw the tree still siaring spreading its branches to the sky, he would draw a long, audible sigh into his lungs. But his relief was only momentary. Even as he sat in his high perch worry would return, the haunting fear that the days of his tree were numbered. At the Orphanage he became distracted and peevish, leaving his food untouched, and at night he cried out in his sleep, dreaming that he saw men cutting down his tree.

Mother Delphine's quick eyes soon perceived that something was wrong. She, good, kind-hearted woman, had a deep belief that it was God's special will that she should watch over the destiny of these destitute little ones, and nothing ever escaped her notice for long. Twice she sent him with Sister Moody, another nun who had but recently been sent to the Orphanage to assist her, to Father Stephenson, an oldish man who had studied medicine but had later given it up for the priesthood; but on both occasions the doctor had

assured her there was nothing wrong with the boy. Then she tried in a thousand ways to win the boy's confidence. Sometimes she took him to her quarters and set him to work on a jig-saw puzzle she had there, or showed him the albums of beautiful coloured plates picturing the life of Jesus which she had retained since childhood. The boy's face would light up while she explained the beautiful into its pining apathy. Too tactful a woman to hope to win the boy's confidence by asking him point-blank what was the matter, she decided upon her only course, for among the children, she loved this intelligent, melancholy child. Although the age for First Communion at the Orphanage was twelve, she decided to let him join the class she was preparing for this rite, which was to take place in about eight weeks.

Two days after Mother Delphine had taken her decision, Willie Pryce, a little Indian inmate of the Orphanage, took ill with influenza. And then the scourge was about the place, and Nat went down with the disease.

One evening, as he was getting well, he sat on his bed in the long dormitory of the Orphanage, piecing together a jig-saw puzzle which Mother Delphine had given him.

Through the shouts of the other children at play outside, he heard footsteps coming along the dormitory. Looking up, he saw Nice and the big policeman dressed in black tunic with white sleeves for the night, and he knew that this was Jim.

Nice started as though she would run towards him, but then she saw one of the nuns at the far end of the room, which checked her impulse, and she came on fast on tiptoe. When she reached Nat she threw

herself on the bed and kissed him hungrily. Then, hugging him, she buried his face in her bosom, while Jim stood straight as a rod above them, looking down and smiling his one-sided, friendly, tolerant smile and slapping the switch he carried against the rough serge that covered his long legs.

Nice said, talking down into his hair:

“That’s Jim. Say ‘hello Jim.’ And you’re coming away out of this old Orphanage and live with us when we’re married, nuh, nuh?”

Nat looked at Jim all the time out of his big, serious eyes. He didn’t like Jim. He didn’t want Nice to kiss him. He didn’t want to go and live with them when they were married.

Some days later, as Nat sidled up to where Mother Delphine sat knitting in the shade of a big tamarind tree in the grounds of the Orphanage, she raised her head from her work, giving her gentle, affectionate smile and her almost imperceptible nod.

As Nat pushed open the gate and went down Mrs. Babb’s yard, he heard the sound of washing in the kitchen. And then he saw the scarred, ravaged earth where the roots of his tree had fed, and the blue, unfriendly sky burst emptily down upon him. His heart beat a stream of grief through his body, and his eyes glazed with tears as he tried to strangle the sobs that exploded, in his bowels. As he stood there, torn and wretched, mourning his terrible loss, Nice came from the closet at the bottom of the yard, and seeing him, ran and squatted before him, folding him in her arms.

And as she held him thus, bathing him in the flood of her affection, all the suffering and wretchedness that was in the boy flared for a moment into red, searing ball of anger, and baring his crimped, child's teeth he buried them deep in the girl's cheek.

Screaming, she flung him from her and jumped to her height, her hands pressed right where he had bitten her. After a long moment she withdrew them, and looking at the bloodied palms said, without anger:

“Los', los', I ain't good enough for my little man. Maybe I am a bitch.”

And as Nat saw the red blood trickling down her face, the dam which had so bravely stemmed the flood of his wretchedness broke, and crying, convulsive and unrestrained, made an aspen of him. Unutterably miserable, he turned, and stumbling blindly, started to run from the yard. But as he started on his blind, erratic run. Nice caught him from behind, and lifting him high, kissed his streaming face again and again with her bloody, sticky lips.