

The Eleventh Virgin

Part I, Chapter II =====

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Summary: (DDLW #871).

CHAPTER II.

Life was becoming very difficult for June. There was nothing to do but read and go to school and help with the housework. Reading, in itself, might have been a pleasure, save for the fact that it was always interrupted to help prepare meals, to set tables, to make beds. Reading, moreover, seemed to make life even more of a problem.

For instance, there was the question of her soul and where she was before she was born and what would be come of her afterward. In reading "Martin Eden," she came across references to Herbert Spencer, and she borrowed "First Principles" from the library and was unhappy that she could not understand it. In reading Edgar Allan Poe, she found references to metempsychosis which was easier to understand and believe, after consulting works of reference. The word led to research in ancient religion. She bumped into Kant and Spinoza afterwards and found them insurmountable. Coming across Darwin, she was slightly encouraged at finding him relatively understandable, and Darwin led her to Huxley and Huxley to Fabre.

She was learning a good deal, she reflected, not in the curriculum at the high school where she had to translate twenty lines each of French, Latin and Greek, write a theme, and read ten pages of dull history a day.

She was studying continually, but in her reading, she had not found any references to adolescence, nor anything to explain why life was so unreasonably difficult and why she was so unhappy.

In a sudden reaction from Zoroastrianism June became interested in the Episcopal church which her mother had attended as a child and her grandmother before her. But enjoyment of the elaborate services was at best a mournful one, nor did the pleasurable conviction of sin come to her until she fell in love. This happened when she was fifteen.

She was terribly sensitive about this new passion which gripped her and left her hot and cold and on the verge of tears, morning, noon and night. She was afraid that her brothers would get possession of the diary which she kept and read about it, and quote some passage to enrage her.

They had done so often enough before—quoted little things, bits of religious ecstasy, scraps about her friends. And she used to become frightfully angry and chase them around the house with the bread knife until they were afraid and told Mother Grace that she was a wild cat. June never would have touched them with it, but she used to pummel them with her fists and bite them and pull their hair till they lost their tempers and fought back.

For a while it had seemed that no hiding-place was safe. If she put the diary

under her mattress and locked the door of her bedroom, they would climb on the shed above the kitchen and in at the window, or they would pry open the door of the bedroom with a knife. Then they would read it, with their heads together over the fire, and giggle and learn passages of it by heart, to recite later. As furious as June became, however, she never ceased keeping it, because she was lonesome and the little red book was her only comfort. Finally a place was found for it underneath the carpet of the back stairs and then she felt safe. This was an emotion more sacred than God and the little Jesus. It must be concealed from everyone, even from herself; only when she was alone, out under the trees in the park with her face pressed to the grass and her body clutching the warm throbbing earth or when she was in her room at night with all the lights out—only then, could she let the hurrying thoughts and desires swarm through her mind, leaving her body aching and trembling.

She had had attachments before, but in retrospect they seemed dully insipid. There was none of the early companionship which she had enjoyed with her mother. Mother Grace no longer called her a comfort. Instead she wondered what had “gotten into” her three eldest children. Relatives were strangers who were familiar with June and could take liberties with her and her emotions. She would have loved her brothers—but they were ashamed of being fond of their sister, and would suffer no expression of love from her. They were cold and aloof to each other, except when drawn together in times of storm; the poverty-stricken tenement on the South side, and the time Mother Grace became hysterical and broke everything in sight—these colossal things made them run together and clutch each other. They had each other and everything else in the world was terrible and mysterious. For brief hours they showed their love and were not ashamed.

June had loved Georgie Spielberger because when Mary Milady punished her for getting wet in a storm, he sympathized with her and consoled her. She had loved Adam Sunquist although he had protruding teeth, because he had said that she could go in swimming with the crowd if she wished, even if they did go in naked. June was six and he was eight, and although his freckles and his teeth prevented him from being just the one she would have chosen for her lover, she was grateful for his attentions. Feminine delicacy interfered on this occasion, so they took a “hitch” on the back of the mail-carrier’s wagon and rode up the mountain to get apricots. But June ate so many of them that she became ill and from that time on hated the apricots and the boy who led her to them.

Then there was a fair-haired boy who sat two seats behind her in Miss Davis’ room at school. In a fit of boredom on a hot day, she sent him a shy little note—“I love you.” The reply was not at all gallant. Pursued, he fled. His note read, “Well, I hate you. You think that you’re the smartest in the room.” June replied, “I hate you, too.” That was all. But at the close of school when they had sung “Now the day is over,” and Miss Davis asked all those who had not whispered during the day to rise, and June rose and he rose, a tragedy occurred. The little tell-tale across the aisle raised her hand and said, “Miss Davis, June and Roy have been passing notes.” And they had to stay in after school, both of

them. The teacher was very anxious to hear what the notes contained, but June would not tell, nor he. She stood at the teacher's desk and wept and the boy stood sullen and obstinate. They would not tell her although she kept them for two hours.

In spite of the fact that the boy carried June's books home from school and told her that he did not mean what he said in his note, she hated him forever after. When she was twelve, she loved Jim Pickering because he also paid attention to her when no one else did. Jim was a man; he was eighteen and worked on a ten-twenty-thirty cent stage as a hypnotist and wrote poetry. All the girls on the block were crazy about him. His attentions appealed to June's sense of vanity. Mr. Henreddy, in one of his recurrent moods of superiority, would not let his daughter play with the girls of the neighborhood nor join in their good times—Mother Grace assisting him in carrying out his idea of exclusiveness—and June envied them and tried to get even with them by inciting their jealousy. Every evening she sat on the front porch and listened to Jim's poetry. Then one day Mother Grace accused her, laughing lightly, of having a "case" on him which shamed and disgusted June so that she fled whenever he was around.

But she had never before been troubled by thoughts of a man's arms and lips. Her mind had never seemed to be connected with her body and it was strange and wonderful that a thought, a glance, could make a little shiver of delight run through her.

The day June fell in love, Mother Grace was in the hospital. June had just received word from Mr. Henreddy that she had a little brother and that he hoped she was glad. She was glad, but not in the way he thought. Tension was relieved; a subject was no longer avoided in the house; Mother Grace would no longer look out of haunted eyes, and now she could wear some sensible clothes again instead of loose, unheard-of garments. And she wouldn't walk around the house any more at night like a silent, dusky ghost.

The baby—June couldn't realize. She hadn't seen him yet. And she had other things to think of. Something had just happened to her and she was not yet sure what it was. From all the novels she had read, she suspected that she had fallen in love. She had fallen in love at first sight even. It was a remarkable thing, a joyous thing, and in a peculiar way, she was happy. She was happy but she wanted to cry. And she was sure that she didn't want to cry because of this new feeling, but because "Miserere" was being played on a hurdy-gurdy down the street. She always wanted to cry when she heard it.

It had happened at two o'clock in the afternoon. June was sitting on the porch crocheting some wash rags for the family.

Half an hour before, she had found a four leaf clover—the first that she had ever seen. She was thrilled in a curious way by it. With the sweet superstition of adolescence, she felt that something was going to happen to her, and that something was not connected in any way with the new baby.

The afternoon sun was filtering through the trees and the pavements were hot. There were some lilac bushes in the next yard and the fresh sweet smell swirled around her like a host of silent bees. She was stung with beauty.

Suddenly she heard steps on the porch next door. She glanced up casually to find a pair of keen blue eyes looking at her. The house had been empty for a long while, and June knew that someone had moved in from down the street. This was the first she had seen of the new family. She had heard a baby crying, heard a woman's voice sighing once in a while, "Oh Gawd" or "Oh that brat," from the room which faced the Henreddy dining-room and opened on an air shaft and she heard a violin whining and exulting now and then, late in the afternoon.

This man who caused such a shudder to shoot through her was Mr. Armand, as she found out afterward, who played in the symphony orchestra. Neighbors on the other side of the street knew him and his family because they had lived there for fifteen years. His wife had sung as a soloist before he married her, they said. He had fallen in love with her three summers before. She didn't ever sing any more. All she did was wheel the baby up and down the street and sew some tiny garments which were far too small for the child which she held in her arms. Mother Grace had seen her and said succinctly, "Another coming? Oh Lord, three small children in two adjoining houses!"

The man stood there for a long moment, fumbling for a key and piercing June with his sharp eyes. His hair was cropped short and brushed straight off his forehead which was high on each side of his temples. His nose was long and sharp and his chin was square with a deep dimple in it and he kept it in the air as though he were laughing contemptuously at the whole world. He was well groomed and he held his shoulders haughtily, and June noticed afterward that he swaggered as he walked.

She liked the interested look in his eyes; there was something personal about it that made her feel grown up. She felt her face flushing but she couldn't turn away till he found the key and entered the house. Then she looked at her hands which were trembling in her lap and which had turned cold although she felt hot all over.

June got up quickly and went into the house for her hat, throwing her crocheting on the dining-room table.

"Where you going?" Adele asked. She was dusting the books on the open shelves and she looked worn and tired. "Let me come too, please, June," and although her sister didn't answer her, she flung the duster behind the door and came with her, hatless and with a smudge on her cheek.

"I hate that house," she said. "And I hate Mrs. Cummins." Mrs. Cummins was temporary house-keeper during their mother's absence. "And I hate to dust and wash dishes. I hate the new baby too. It only means that we'll be tied down all afternoon so that we can't run away together for picnics as we used to. We'll always have him whimpering around. Do you remember how all day long the Weiss girls had to take care of their baby brother?"

"And mother'll be more cranky and particular about things and there'll be more work around the house with a kid. Oh, damn!" She bit her lips to keep from crying.

"Well," she said at last with a resignation which seemed very sweet to June—"well, there's one comfort. You and I'll get noble, just like 'Beulah,' wheeling a carriage up and down the street and walking the floor with him and taking care of him

while he's sick. Do you mind awfully having this baby come?"

"No!" June snapped at her, more from the intensity of emotion than from actual ill-temper. "That's just one little worry."

"What's the matter then?"

"Everything." And June began to run wildly through the short grass till she was completely out of breath and Adele gasped as she caught up.

Arriving at the lake front, they clambered out on the breakwater which jutted like a pointed finger in the deadly calm water. Far out, on the very end, they sat among the rocks and listened to the water sobbing softly around the rotten wood. In a tiny patch of dirt which had settled there, a dandelion was growing, smiling up at the sky lonesomely. Its gay color stabbed the air. Every once in a while, a little wave leaped and sparkled with another splash of color which greeted the flower. A breeze sprang up as the sun settled on the sky line, and stirred the wisps of hair around their hot faces. It was like a caress and June thought of Mr. Armand's long fingers.

"Why don't you say something?" Adele burst in on her thoughts. "You haven't spoken to me for days, and you've got that silent look I don't like. What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking of the hate we have inside of us," June lied. "You hate everything and so do I. I hate the springtime. It's so restless and uncomfortable. You never want to do what you ought to be doing. You can't sit still and read and if you have to dust a room or wash dishes you have an awful ache in your heart. I tell you I hate it."

But really June didn't hate it. She loved to be bitten by fierce emotion. This steady restlessness had suddenly become a torment but she would not have given it up now that she knew what it was.

They sat there for a long time, Adele pulling out a tattered copy of "Jane Eyre" from the blouse of her dress and devouring it with an absorbed expression on her lean little face.

June stretched out on the rocks and let the wind kiss her lips and listened to the gurgling of the water around.

It was twilight when they reached home.

June discovered before the week was over the Mr. Armand, during the spring and summer months, led band concerts in the park a block away from her home. All through the summer the year before, she used to lie in bed and thrill at the little wisps of melody that floated in on the fragrant night. Often she begged her mother to let her go. There was little enough melody in their regular and placid lives. Her existence for the last six years had been so calm and restrained that now some little thing like a strain of music, the glance of a man's eye as he passed and the scent of a summer night aroused her strangely. There were no adventures to make her realize that life was joyful. When Adele and June were younger and their parents had been engrossed in making ends meet, there had been opportunities to run away and mingle with the crowds of children in playgrounds and play in the dirty streets with strange little girls and tell them wild, imaginative tales. Even the boys that June used to play with who now came to the house were distant and different. It was a humdrum life of

lonesomeness and she was fifteen.

Adele and June made up their minds that while Mother was in the hospital and Mr. Henreddy was working nights they would take advantage of the freedom and go to the concert. Adele was by nature more cautious and conscientious than June but she longed so to get away from the house that she was easily persuaded to do what she considered a wicked and thrilling thing.

"Suppose the boys tell?" she whispered.

"I know they won't." June was very confident of that. "I've got something on both of them, and they don't dare. You didn't know and you mustn't tell, but Dan broke a window on the next block and got arrested for it. He made me promise not to tell, but I will if he starts snitching on us. And Dave is fighting—real prize fights—in the back room of the Emery Street saloon. Mother doesn't know that either. One day he broke a thumb. I promised I wouldn't tell her, so they won't dare tell anything that we do."

It had showered that afternoon, and all the park was cool and moist. People were hurrying to the concert to get seats. A slight breeze stirred the women's clothes and wafted faint perfumes to June as the children passed them. Every now and then a little toad hopped across the path.

"Everything smells so good!" and Adele sniffed ecstatically.

They arrived at the concert ground early and found seats in the second row of the benches where they faced the band-master and could watch his every movement. They waited and waited. There was a continual babble of voices, but Adele and June were silent.

Then Mr. Armand strode through the crowd, and there was a ripple of applause as he came which swelled and swelled. He was tall and lithe. June noticed again with a thrill the aggressive way he carried his shoulders.

Adele nudged her sister as he passed. "He lives next door to us now," she whispered. "I've seen him pass a couple of times. He knows father because he always speaks to him."

June kicked her under the bench to make her keep quiet. She was irritated that Adele should break the sensuous stillness that enveloped her and she was angry and jealous that her sister should have seen him more often than she. And it was then too, that he passed her seat, which was on the outside by the aisle, and his hand brushed hers. The contact made her catch her breath and an agreeable quiver came to her heart.

For the rest of the evening June gazed at him with an intensity which he must have felt, she reasoned, because every now and then he'd look her way and smile. And all the while the spell grew and grew.

A week later, Mother Grace came home from the hospital with a tiny atom in her arms which she put in a clothes basket on the floor. The family bull dog smelled at it for an instant and woofed joyously. The tip of his tongue stood out as though he would like to give it a mighty and slobbery kiss that would engulf it. But he looked at Mother and slunk away.

Mother seemed tired. She showed no pride in her new possession. All day long she sat at the window with her brows puckered. Although Mr. Henreddy wanted

her to go to bed, she stubbornly refused.

A feeling of awe swept over June every time she looked at her mother. Once in a great while when she managed to play with any of the children in the neighborhood, she had caught fragments of conversation which recalled Sadie Spielberger and her revelations. Also, in the tenement on Twenty-second Street, Mrs. Cleary had had a baby and June remembered how she had hidden her head under the covers and strangled the sobs in her throat as sounds came down the airshaft.

June wanted to question Mother Grace about it, but it took more courage than she possessed. It was only when the library grew dusky and the baby, whom father called "Glubb" was being nursed preparatory for bed that she could ask her—"Mother Grace, did it hurt?" and clutch her hand.

"Who's been saying things to you, or what have you been reading?" Her tone was brusque. "It was nothing much. Wore me out somewhat. Have you got the dishes washed?"

The children had never known what it was to have Mother sick before, so her irritability, added to increased household duties made their lives seem dark. Adele and June used to cry in bed at night. June's only relief during that long hard summer were the moments when her blood ran fire at Mr. Armand's glance. She saw him three times a day regularly. At ten in the morning he left the house; at three in the afternoon he returned; at quarter of eight in the evening he left again for the concert.

All day she thought of him, and she found herself unconsciously imitating his walk, and when she caught herself at it, she felt a hot wave spread over her. Mother Grace used to say he swaggered and June would agree indifferently, although she became acutely self-conscious at the sound of his name. And because the neighbors talked about him behind his back, Mother Grace called him worthless too and said that he went around with other women. June didn't blame him when she knew his wife.

She was a tall woman—though he was taller—and her hair was shot with grey. The baby was two years old, and once when June and Adele were walking and wheeling Glubb and she passed, she turned to June and said, "Gawd, these brats make me tired."

In June's heart she agreed with her, because she was hot and tired and unhappy. But she condemned her for saying what she did because she was his wife. She condemned her big floppy hat too, and her clothes were what Mother Grace called "in bad taste."

On some golden afternoons June saw Mr. Armand oftener. In the afternoon when he returned, sometimes he took the baby to the park with him and sauntered down the steps and past with his pugnacious chin in the air; and June would look at him defiantly, angry with him for the feelings he evoked, yet loving him all the while.

On the days that he did not send her that sympathetic and exciting glance, she was miserable and sad and when she was alone at night, wallowed in melancholy. Being at the Tennysonian age, the lines kept coming to her, increasing her mood—

*“Dear as remembered kisses after death
Or sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned
On lips that are for others—
Deep as love, deep as first love,
And wild with all regret . . .”*

One violet evening his baby was ill. From June’s dusky seat on the porch she could see him pacing up and down the path in front of the house. Every now and then when the baby began to moan, he bent his head and a soft murmur reached her.

It was only occasionally that he played the violin at home and because of this, she had a queer feeling that what he played was for her. Sometimes for a breathless hour or so, she could hear wild, quivering notes that ate her heart out.

He must have seen the worship in her eyes, but she did not mind. She wanted him to know, though she concealed from every one else how she adored him. She never imagined herself speaking to him, holding a casual, conventional conversation before the house about the babies, the weather or the last concert. But adventures crowded into her mind; his baby toddling out into the street, an automobile swiftly upon it, and June rushing out to save it just in time, but at the cost of her own life. Of course this didn’t happen while Mr. Armand was away. It happened when he could only rush forward, too late to save his child—that June had already done—but in time to hold her in his arms while she died.

There was also the adventure of his wife disappearing with another man and the baby falling ill and June being called in to nurse it back to health and thereby gaining Mr. Armand’s love.

When she realized her thoughts, the absurdity of them rushed over her so that she blushed with shame. Such situations were crude and melodramatic.

The summer faded away; autumn came and with it long walks, sweet-smelling days in the park with Glubb. There were fires from faded leaves on every street and the delicate spirals of smoke were a melancholy incense. The sweet clover in the fields down by the lake where June walked made the air heavy. The soft waves whispered at the breakwater all the day long.

But with the late autumn, school came again and band concerts ceased and she no longer saw Mr. Armand. The sky was muddy, there was no brightness in it. Music had fled with all the little breezes that aroused the soft emotions in her heart.

Long hours of study, the constant struggle in the family, housework and the baby occupied her time and her imagination. There was no more romance.

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