

CHAPTERS FROM UNWRITTEN AUTO- BIOGRAPHIES

III

BOOK HUNGER

By Honoré Willsie Morrow

WHEN I was a little girl about six years old, the family fortunes or rather misfortunes took us for a few years to a little Illinois mining town. It was set flat on the prairie with a very large creek flowing through its centre, also a very large canal along which traveled canal boats of a size to accomodate a whole family. Over the creek was a broad flat bridge and over the canal was a high, high, red iron bridge.

Our house stood on the top of a hill near the street that was crossed by the creek and the canal. It was a large white house with green blinds and was surrounded by a very high picket fence. In the front yard were four or five huge pine trees. In the side yard was a tamarack tree which towered higher than the house. On the side of the house opposite from the tamarack was a delightful thing: an iron pipe set into an artesian well from which ran a steady little jet of water. This jet, in the course of years, had worn a doll's size river across the yard and this rivulet was the choicest plaything in our possession. There was a slanting cellar door at the back of the house, too slivery for a slide, and there was a spooky old barn into which one seldom ventured because there was a devil wild man

who lived under the loft stairs. My brother told me so.

The house had many windows and many rooms heated in winter by base burners with glowing red eyes. There was a bookcase in the living room with almost all grown up books in it; Byron in a set of tiny blue leather volumes on the top shelf and "Tom Jones" in brown leather on the bottom shelf. The base burner in the living room was interesting. On its top was a bronze statuette of a knight on a charger. The front of it was mostly isinglass but the back of it, under the stove pipe connection, had printing on it in tiny raised type. This printing comprised the first sentence which I learned to read:

SEE LIST OF PATENTS ON THE BOTTOM.

It was a stupendous moment in my life when I came from behind the stove one snowy afternoon when I was about six and pronounced the sentence to the family. The list of patents *was* on the bottom, too! I learned to read the list by putting my head under the stove when the fire was low.

I was born with a capacity for terrible hungers! One chief memory of this period in my life is of praying passionately, night after night, that the Lord change my blue eyes and black hair to yellow ringlets and brown

eyes like Phronsie Pepper's and that He find me more books to read. Oh, for books, for books! I had exhausted all the juvenile possibilities of our bookcase by the time I was eight. Our town, though very large, having perhaps fifteen hundred inhabitants, had no public library. But though the Lord remained obdurate concerning my style of beauty, He did lead me to two or three caches of books.

Over back of us, in a small cottage covered with grape vines, lived a very nice man with grey whiskers. This man made soap for a living. His son Tom, who had epileptic fits, collected fat from the farmers and the father turned it into soap—an astounding alchemy! Then, on a day, young Tom was found dead among the barrels of fat which he was driving home. After he was buried I saw his father crying behind the barn in which he made soap. So I climbed over our back fence and went to comfort him. After a little while he invited me in to see him make soap.

It was wonderful, that great vat full of yellow gold bubbling and smelling like a thousand wash days. The soap man allowed me to stir the strange stew made, as we mournfully agreed, from the last fat poor Tom had died a-getting. It developed during the stirring that the poor boy was "terrible fond of books". That he had owned three. That the soap man did not know their titles. I cannot recall how I got over to the soap man my uncontrollable desire to see those books, for my mother had forbidden me to borrow literature from the neighbors after I had brought home an illustrated book on Minor Surgery. But I have a vivid picture in my memory of the tall soap man leading me into the dim cottage where his fat wife knelt before a zinc covered trunk

in the dead boy's room. And I recall now my heart thumped when, in response to her husband's request, her face twisted suddenly into soul tearing contortions and she burst into loud sobs:

"I won't give nothing of his away! I'll let her look at them if she sets where you or I can watch her."

She pointed to the bed under the eaves. It was covered by a blue and white patchwork quilt. On one of the pillows were stacked three books, "Pilgrim's Progress", "Uncle Tom's Cabin", Stanley's "In Darkest Africa". I had read the first two. But a moment later I was walking back to the soap factory with Stanley in my arms. The soap man established me on a sack of oats under the window beyond the vat and I slipped away into Africa. How long it took me to finish the book, I do not know. There is a medley in my mind of many Saturday afternoons when I panted through the jungle with the smell of a thousand wash days in my nostrils, with the unbelievably beautiful vat of gold bubbling while the soap man looked from the vat to me and I was conscious that he was glad to have a child to keep him company.

It was a great tale, Stanley's "Africa", but it could not satisfy me forever. About the time I finished it, I decided to attend the Methodist Sunday School. My mother, a Unitarian, had been teaching us at home of a Sunday although the town boasted of three churches, Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic. I was quite contented with mother's teaching until I found one of my playmates reading a red bound book called "Elsie Dinsmore". She told me she had borrowed it from her Sunday School library.

Mother, bless her, must have realized by this time how relentless was

the book hunger that drove me. For, behold me in a starched white dress with a pink Sunday School paper in my hand, standing beside the Sunday School librarian whose lesser capacity, I understood, was that of being the Methodist preacher's wife. There were at least fifty books on the shelves in the rear of the church. I recall only the ten or fifteen Elsie books and the Dottie Dimple and Prudy books. I read them all through again and again and I decided to be exactly the same kind of child that Elsie was.

As if to aid and abet me in this desire, a revivalist came to our town and held a children's evening during his week's stay. It was midsummer and burning hot on the prairies. In the twilight, with my hand in my brother's, I went to the church. It was packed with grown ups and children. There were swarms of mosquitoes and flies around the kerosene lamp that hung over the preacher's head.

He talked to us with such thrilling earnestness that when he shouted suddenly, "All the little children that love Jesus, stand up for Him!" I came to my feet instantly.

My brother jerked me violently down into my place. "You don't love Jesus. You're a Unitarian!" he hissed.

"I'm not! I'm a Methodist!" I retorted, struggling to rise.

No one heeded us, for many children were sobbing of their sins and many grown ups were shouting, "Halleluia! Take them, Lord!", while someone was singing, "Wash me in the blood of the Lamb!"

Suddenly, as I struggled with my brother, a sinister roar like the onrush of an express train sounded above the din of the revival. In a moment, something crashed against the church. It rocked on its foundations. Some-

one shrieked, "Cyclone!" The lamp went out and everyone rushed for the door. I remember an awful confusion of tramping feet and of hands that pushed children down. I remember falling and I remember somehow finding myself in the open air, where, in a curious yellow light and in a cold so intense it cut to the bone, people wallowed on their knees and shrieked to God to save them.

Beyond the trees and building that it destroyed and the human beings that it injured, the tornado did no serious damage in our town save that it annihilated the Methodist Sunday School library.

I suspect my mother of twinkling eyes when I expressed an earnest desire to become a Baptist. But she did not oppose me and I began to attend the Baptist Sunday School. This school owned a library of perhaps twenty five volumes, nearly all of them the Pansy books. I recall of them only "Christy's Christmas". I cannot say that the Baptists had a profound effect on me either in a literary or a religious way. The Catholics had much more.

My chums were Agnes and Allie, the daughters of the flagman on the railroad. They were Catholic and had no Sunday School library, so they drew rather heavily on my religious resources. I had heard my mother say that the Catholic priest was the one cultured man in the town except my father, so it puzzled me that he had no Sunday School library. Agnes and Allie said that he was so good that he didn't have to read. But they were mistaken, as I later was to prove to them.

It was like this. One day I started to visit Agnes and Allie with "Christy's Christmas" tucked in the front of my sailor blouse. I had to cross the broad bridge over the very wide creek. There

was a turtle sunning himself on a log under the bridge. I stooped far over to watch him, slipped, and only the strength of my corduroy skirt and a friendly nail saved me from joining the turtle, head first. I hung upside down screaming and watching "Christy's Christmas" float idly against the turtle's green log and a dragon fly settle on it, until a strong hand lifted me back to the bridge. It was the Catholic priest.

He had a round red face. He wiped my face with a handkerchief that smelled of tobacco and he rescued Christy, all without smiling. I was terror stricken when I saw the condition of the book.

"Whist!" he said. "I'll fix it up with my good Baptist brother. I'd do more than that for your mother's daughter. She's rare, a saint with a brain! And I've a copy of her Brownings in my pocket this minute!"

I went on to Agnes and Allie's house. I loved their mother. She was tall and slender and had waving brown hair parted back from a tender madonna face. I stared up into this tender face as I told her my story and she, too, listened without a smile.

"He's a good man, Father Garritty. The girls are playing under the blackberry bushes. It's just as well you don't be reading that trash."

That night as I sat on the high post of our tall picket fence, Father Garritty brought round to me a copy of "Tom Sawyer", which I read to myself and then to Agnes and Allie under the blackberry bushes.

I certainly should have turned Catholic over "Tom Sawyer" if dear Father Garritty had made that the price of loaning "Tom" or the other books that his housekeeper guarded in his little sitting room. But he was no proselyter, and I made no return

for his literary favors. I read his "Dombey and Son" with my long legs wrapped round the legs of his desk chair, a great crucifix with that ivory face of poignant beauty looking down on me as I read. I cannot read "Dombey" now without the sense of a tragic face brooding over me, while, as a far door intermittently opens and closes, boys' translucent voices rise and fall at choir practice.

It was all so long and long ago. I was still a little child when we left the prairie town, and life at the full with all its tides and turmoils was to have its way with me before I saw it again. Yet because they were experienced at the most plastic moment of my life, the days spent in that little town assumed an enormous importance in my dreams. I cannot tell you with what frequency the thoughts of the little town returned to me and with what tender yearning I lingered over them. At last the desire to see the town again became one of my hungers and three years ago I went back to it.

I got off the train with an extraordinary sense of excitement. I knew that the little place had not grown during all the years and I hoped to find it quite unchanged. My first visit was to be to the Baptist Church. I walked along the town's chief thoroughfare, scanning each face for some familiar feature. I crossed a small red iron bridge over a threadlike canal with an overgrown tow path. I crossed a beggarly little creek spanned by a narrow footbridge. I climbed the gentle slope to the spot where our house had stood. The house was there, a small affair painted white with green blinds, surrounded by a low picket fence. The trees were gone, as were the artesian pipe and the rivulet.

Something sodden and heavy replaced my excitement. I tramped on to the Baptist Church. It had been sold to the Elks. No one knew that it ever had owned a library. I began to stop people in the street. Did they remember our family? They looked up at me—I so very tall that had been a very little girl—and shook their heads doubtfully. Where was the soap man? Dead years ago and his place burned down. Where were Agnes and Allie? Still living with their mother at the old place.

I rushed up the so weirdly familiar street, a giant in Lilliput. There it was, thank heaven, the little old house! My hand shook as I rang the bell.

A small, elderly woman opened the door and stood staring up into my face. But it still was there, the madonna look.

"Oh!" I gasped. "Don't you, won't you please remember me?"

She took the hand I held out to her and kept it while she looked up at me, at first puzzled and then with the old familiar smile. "Why, Honoré, how you have grown! Come in!"

She led me into the parlor. I sat down and gazed at her. I wanted to make her understand what this pilgrimage meant to me. How my thought of the little town was woven of the tenderest, happiest memories of my life. How I had cherished every recollection of it until it had become an important part of my existence.

"How is your mother?" she asked, gently.

"She died three months ago!" I replied.

We stared at each other, this memory-woman on whom time had set his relentless marks, and I who had lived so difficult a life. Suddenly she burst into tears, and I crossed the room and, burying my face in her lap, wept with her. . . . O time and change . . . !

Thus ended my great trip. Yet although for a time after it was over, the disillusionment and the pain threw the town and its people on the screen of my memory as they actually are, evidently it is not always to be so. For, today, when I began to set down these memories, a miracle occurred. I have been afraid for months to recall the little town. But time, which repairs quite as much as it tears down, has been at work on my truth-wounded memories!

As I write, the little bridges are high and broad again. The picket fence reaches to my chin. The pines and the tamarack sigh sweetly over the large rambling house, and I look up again into the face of Agnes and Allie's mother, loving its pink smoothness and the waving brown hair. The Methodist and Baptist libraries are flourishing facts, and over in the soap man's place a huge vat of gold bubbles as he looks down on a little girl who is traveling through the jungle. While, hallowing it all, my dear mother, so young, so vital, so tenderly understanding, pervades the very essence of my dream.

Thank God that this is so!