

Susan

Part of a Novel

Maurice F. Kenny

A LEAN woman shuffled about her kitchen. Her gaunt body, with its level bosom and cramped round shoulders, stepped quietly about the stove, her movements slow and mechanical.

"Five! Susan ain't home yet, an' the dark's settlin' on."

She scowled.

"She's most likely been caught in the blizzard," she remarked to a boy playing on the floor.

"But she does like to stay off. Always wantin' to go galavantin' around when she oughtta be home helpin'. These youngins don't care nothin' about their folks, how hard we work. She's old enough to know."

By the stove, the boy of seven was playing with a ball on the floor. He tossed the toy against the wall and, as it bounced away, he watched chips of paint and grains of plaster slide to the plank floor and form into dunes.

"Frank, put your ball up."

Her waspy voice frightened him.

"Your Pa'll be in for supper soon. You know he ain't fixed on you playin' like that. You're growin' up like your sister . . . not carin' about nothin'. Someday you are goin' have to learn to care, like Susan," she said, shaking a fork at him.

He raised his head to face his mother.

"Yes, ma."

The kitchen was a large, nearly bare room with scrubbed floors and livid walls naked of pictures and clean of ornaments. A dull, old rifle hung on pegs over the arch opening into the parlor and a fly-specked calendar had been nailed to the wall beside the door. A granite rock, that had qualities of an aging human face, held back a pile of damp green logs, by a copper wash-tub, from spilling across the floor. Pushed to the wall, a cast-iron stove sent off waves of heat and odors of burning pine-tar. An oil lamp glowed brightly on the warped surface of a vast round table that stood in the very center of the room. Other than the four or five straight chairs, the curtains on the windows and a sagging cot by the door, there was nothing in the room to make the Tanner family comfortable.

Mrs. Tanner continued with her supper-preparation, but half seemed to dread spooning out the steaming foods into the bowls on the wall-shelf beside her.

"There's always somethin' to get done on a farm," she muttered, lighting a lamp on the stove-mantel, "and there ain't never enough hands to help."

She lifted the cover from a kettle and jerked back as a flood of clouding steam shot out at her.

Mrs. Tanner was short, bony and colorless. Her hair was the color of spring mud, though heavily brushed through with grey, and lay at the nape of her slender neck in a fat wad. Loose strands of hair drooped across her right ear, and an ash-smudge darkened her cheek. Her face was long, slim and lined with deep crevices about the mouth. Though hardly forty, she appeared fifty, for her brown eyes were old and her hollow cheeks were as pale as washed stones. She seemed more the poverty-stricken spinster than a mother.

She forked the boiling cabbage, holding back from the raging steam and, satisfied that the vegetable was not yet tender, placed the lid back upon the iron pot.

"Go wash your hands, Frank!" she said angrily.

Rising from the floor, nearly frightened by her cold voice, he went to wash. He scraped his shoes along the planks, as he walked to the sink, and he wondered why his mother would always grow angry as supper time approached. In the mornings, she always kissed him, held him on her lap, combed his hair with her fingers, and she would tell him stories of her girlhood in his grandmother's kitchen. But at dusk she was different. She told no stories, gave him no frosting pans to clean out with a spoon, and he noticed how nervous she became, how stiff her words were and how she constantly tormented him with do's and don't's. Now as he washed his hands in the icy pump-water, he half loved his mother and wanted to obey her, yet half feared her and had a desire to rush out into the blizzard blowing down from the black hills.

"I suppose that sister of your's stopped at Aunt May's for a cup a tea. Spends half her time there . . . like she didn't have a home," she mumbled, stirring the frying potatoes in the large skillet.

Frank at seven was slight and frail but had a fine crop of black curls and dark lustrous eyes that were as winning as his smile. Like his mother, his tenuous lips were pale, and his sallow face seemed pinched but was as smooth as a spring flower. His black eye-brows emphasized the whiteness of his skin and the yellow pallor about his eyes proved his delicate health.

"Wish she'd hurry up and get home," Mrs. Tanner continued to grumble. "She's got things to do."

His hands washed, the boy sauntered to the window and stared out at the lowering December sky in hopes of a glimpse of his sister. Off in the distance, he noticed the snow dimly falling on his father's sagging barn. He saw how it gathered on the roof and threatened to tumble off the eaves, and he giggled at the thought of standing in the forefront of the downfall. Jingling a penny and some nails in his pants' pocket, he strolled back to the hot stove. He squatted on the floor, Indian fashion, and could feel the singeing waves of heat run along the length of his bare arm.

"Get up, Frank," his mother commanded. "It's cold as ice on the floor! Here you've been out of a sick bed just two days an' you're moppin' the floors. . . . You want to land back in bed?"

He frowned, but rose, hearing the logs crackle and sputter with a spitting hiss inside the stove's iron belly. Bored, he strolled about the room looking for something to play with, to kill the time until his sister would come home.

Crunching footsteps hurried through the snow. He raced to the window. His face was radiant with excitement. His mouth was a broad smile. He saw Susan wave good-bye to a dark figure that stood near his father's tool shed, and he watched her trudge to the door through the deep drifts.

"Here's Susan," he called happily. "She's home, ma," he said, dancing and clapping his small hands.

The door burst open. A girl dressed in a heavy leather mackinaw stepped quickly into the room with a flurry of snow and gust of wind behind her. She pushed the door shut, blocking the blizzard's entrance, and sprang about with a deep grin on her lips.

"Hi! Mama. Gosh it's snowing awful."

Her dark and smooth plump cheeks, her full lips were stained purple from the biting air. Her black curls fell loose about her shoulders in thick plaits. She was breathless. Her young bosom throbbed from the hike across the fields, and her firm small nostrils seemed to quiver now that she was in the warm room. She stamped her feet on the floor and shook the snow from her clothes.

"Hi! Frank. Gosh you look happy for a sick boy."

She stooped, hugged her excited brother and crossed the room to embrace Mrs. Tanner.

"You'll get me all wet," her mother said sharply, drawing back from the girl.

"It's wonderful, Mama. Golly I love winter."

Handing her strapped books to Frank, Susan jerked off her woolen mittens and, chattering gayly, she unbuttoned the leather mackinaw.

"Frank, you should see the snowman the kids at school built."

She gestured with her hands to show its size.

"He's big and fat like Pa, but he's got the biggest and blackest coal-eyes I ever saw," she laughed. "The kids stuck Miss Aswell's old straw on his head and put a paper tulip in his hand. He looks so funny standing there with that flower with all the snow falling down on him. You'd die laughing if you could see him, Franky."

The boy crowded around her, eager to hear more of the wonderful snowman.

Wrenching her slender arms from the coat's sleeves, she draped the burly coat on a chair-back and smoothed out her checkered skirt.

"Mama, Miss Aswell said that Frank should come back Monday if the weather's good. She said he's missed an awful lot of school-

work.”

Pursing her lips, Mrs. Tanner scowled.

“Less he stays offin’ that floor, he ain’t goin’ no place but the grave.”

Susan giggled and sailed across the room to Frank.

“I brought a picture book for you, Frank! Maybe we can read it before supper.”

“Thank your sister, boy,” Mrs. Tanner said.

He smiled gratefully, his black eyes flashing, and pulled out a chair from the table for Susan.

“It’s the birth of the Baby Jesus,” Susan said, shoving the small book into her brother’s hands.

“Hide it,” Mrs. Tanner commanded. “Don’t let your father see it,” she said quietly, stealing a glance at the door. “You well know he don’t like that here. Don’t we all have to say our prayers when he’s gone to the barn? Now hide it.”

“But, Mama, I . . .”

“You’re late, Miss! Where you been?” she asked sharply, watching a bewildered expression flood across Susan’s full face.

“I had to stay. We were putting up the decorations for the dance. . . . Mama, Pa won’t stop me, will he? I can go, can’t I, Mama?”

She timidly glided to her mother, her tremulous face flushed.

“This is my first, and I’ve just got to go.”

Her mother studied her for a moment.

“He won’t think you’re old enough,” Mrs. Tanner finally replied.

“I am, Ma. I’m fifteen! Margy Marker went last year and she was only thirteen. Besides,” she said, her face glowing with pride and pleasure, “besides, Lafe Vallen said he’d take me if Pa said I could.”

Mrs. Tanner turned to the stove, evading her daughter’s breathless question, and stooped to peek in the oven at her roast. She forked the beef and watched the brown juice gush from the sizzling meat. The rich smell filled her nostrils.

“Ask him,” she drawled at last, seeming not to care whether the girl was given permission or not. “He might. He mightn’t. ’Pends on how he’s feelin’.”

The roast cooking to her satisfaction, she straightened and tried to smile for the anxious girl.

“Mama, why’s Pa so funny when it comes to going to parties and things? He won’t even let us go to Mass. Why not, Ma?”

Mrs. Tanner started to speak but hesitated and glanced about the room.

Frank, busy at the table thumbing through his sister’s books, watched Susan as she took a seat opposite him and unfastened the blue buckles of her galoshes.

“Why not, Ma?” she repeated her question.

Their mother stood at the stove, forking the browning potatoes in the skillet. She was silent for what seemed to Susan hours. She made no effort to answer the question but slowly circled about and, once facing the children, tried to appear calm and cheerful. But she nervously attempted to retie the bow at the back of her apron.

"I don't know what to tell you, child," she whispered awkwardly.

Hesitating to continue, she went to rinse her hands beneath the pump at the iron sink.

"Your father's not just an ord' nary man," she drawled, drying her fingers on the apron hem. "He ain't insane or nothin' like that," she nodded her head. "He's just strange an' hard to count on, that's all."

The children stared at her face.

"You know yourself he can be as gentle as a flower or wild as a bull. . . . He's odd!"

She dropped her glance for a moment and peered down at a crack in the floor.

"You children have got to learn to understand your Pa."

She swayed slightly, as though dancing, with her arms folded across her breast. "You must try to understand him. Lord knows I've been tryin', an' it ain't the easiest thing in the world to do."

Frank stirred in his chair.

"Pa don't like us," he asserted, glancing up from his books.

"He likes us well enough, boy. He's just not affectionate like some men, that's all. He ain't mean just to be mean, I don't suppose. He tries to be nice. . . . Why, didn't he take us all to the fair last fall?"

Susan frowned.

"Yes, but, Mama, he wouldn't let us go on any of the rides or play the games. We couldn't do nothing but stay where the cows were. And he . . ."

"He don't believe in spendin' on plain foolishness what come from the bendin' of his back."

For a quick moment she was angry with the girl, then her tense face softened.

"He works hard for what he gets. The Lord knows it ain't much. None comes easy, you know. He can't milk a cow an' 'spect a bucket of silver."

She droned on, clenching her fists and working her apron hem.

"He works hard with his hands . . . plowin' an' hayin' . . . up early at all hours, rain or shine, while you're off in a warm school or in a soft bed. There's no rest when you're fightin' the earth, child. No rest and not much fun. You're gonna find that out when you children get children of your own to feed and got stock to tend. And a million other things to do when you're farmin' it. You'll see."

She jerked her head up and down, speaking, pushing her lips hard to emphasize her meaning.

"You'll get woke up from your dream one of these fine days. An'

you'll sit up and take a look."

Susan, ashamed, dropped her head. She dared not to look to her mother's strained face.

"I never went to school past the fifth grade," her mother dawdled on. "Not past the fifth grade," she repeated. "Because my folks was poor an' needed the money I could bring in. I was littlern you when I went out to work. An' Sam wasn't much bigger'n Frank there," she said, throwing a glance to the boy.

"He weren't a mite older. I scrubbed floors, on my hands an' knees, an' emptied somebody else's bedpots before I was twelve."

Frank closed the book and rested his cheek on the cool table, his eyes staring at his mother.

Susan could feel a tear burning into her cheek, could feel it rush down to her lips. She swallowed, tasting the brine on her tongue, and pawed the floor with her foot.

"I ain't tryin' to make excuses for my meanness, nor for your Pa's, cause he ain't none too pleasant to me either. But I say you got to try to understand. We all got to try."

The children sat quietly at the table watching their mother and saw the sorrow on her wrinkling face. She seemed haggard, and her eyes were clouded and swollen with tears.

It was difficult for Susan to imagine her mother being young, handsome, gracious, laughing with a beau at her side and a picnic basket between them. The girl had never heard her mother laugh jubilantly, only in subdued coughs. She had never seen her mother excited or in extreme pain. If her mother had desires or moments of despair, then Susan had not known them, nor had wished to know them. Now, as she saw her mother for the first time in her true form, aging and exhausted, she realized that she had never really cared whether or not the woman had feelings of any kind. She felt as if she had been struck across the face with a whip.

"Mama," she gasped, clutching the chair-knobs tightly in her fists.

Susan could see no laughter in either of her parents. She discovered no great yearning for life, no love or flare for gaiety, nor time for pleasure and happiness . . . only cold faces and work, perpetual, endless work. Rising from the chair, she rushed across the room. She threw her arms about the woman's waist; she buried her head in her mother's shrunken bosom, and cried.

"Mama, Mama," she cried. "O Mama. Haven't you ever been happy? Has it always and always been like this? Haven't you ever laughed and danced, or cried real hard, or wanted to hug somebody until you just crushed them to death with love? I'm such a ninny. I'm really crazy sometimes, Mama. I'm always wanting so much from you and Pa, and I've never stopped once to see if you were happy. And the worst is, you haven't been."

The girl kissed her mother's cheek.

"Tain't necessary for me," she answered, embarrassed. "I don't

mind if you and Frank are fine an' happy. That's what we work for."

Susan smiled and wiped a tear off her cheek.

"I don't like to see my two children do without and be miserable."

She paused. Only the ticking of the parlor clock and the roar of the wild wind outside could be heard in the warm kitchen.

Bewildered, Frank peered up from the table at his mother and sister. He saw them crying.

"I can't cry. I can't laugh. I cried too much before an' there ain't much to laugh about now. There's too much dyin' an' sufferin' all over."

She cupped Susan's pale face in the palms of her knotty hands.

The girl smiled tenderly at her mother.

Their eyes met. Something passed between them, something warm and fine, something that neither of them could name, but that something bound them together for the first time and the mother embraced the daughter, passing her hand over the girl's silken brow.

"O child, you don't know," Mrs. Tanner drawled, her words coming slow and hard. "You don't know. You're so young an' full of your grand ideas an' wantin' your good times. Course you never stopped to think about us. You're so young."

She pressed the girl once more to her breast, and both were silent.

Frank looked on quietly, daring not to speak, bewildered by the words and actions of his mother and sister. He feared his breathing would break the peace. Hearing the logs crackling in the stove and the incessant tickings of the clock, he shifted in his chair, held his breath, and, praying to the Baby Jesus, hoped they would end their argument.

Then the mother released the girl. She shoved her off with a half laugh.

"Here I'm standin' fussin' around when I oughtta be gettin' your Pa's supper. He'll likely be mad when he struts through that door. He don't like these storms none too well."

"Pa don't like us," Frank blurted out, dreading his father's arrival from the barn.

"Nonsense, boy," Mrs. Tanner replied.

As Tess turned to her work at the stove, Susan prowled blindly about the kitchen. She stooped to recover a mitten that had fallen to the floor, straightened a chair to the table and, stopping her wanderings, pushed back the window curtains to see the falling of the snow. She stood still, feeling a jet of wind gush through an opening in the sill. She shuddered. A finger slowly reached out and touched the silvery frost that covered the glass pane. She did not feel the sting of the white froth.

Her thoughts were far from the winter scene before her and the kitchen with its hot stove and kerosene lamps burning brightly. Her thoughts were far away from the brother who sat at the table thumbing through the book of Christ's birth. She had for a time even for-

gotten the all-important school dance, and her fervent desire to attend. She did not feel the frost on the pane as its bitter cold sting shot through her fingertips.

It was Spring in her thoughts. The grass was green and the hills were ablaze with flowers and spotted with grazing cows. Off in the distance, she could see the Adirondacks rising to meet the sky. The sky was blue and the hills were a worn-brown. She saw birds wing off through the blue over the hills. A honey bee buzzed at her feet on the silken petals of a full bloomed dandelion, and a flock of white butterflies darted past. She saw them swoop down and flutter onto a small group of bluebells. They hung to the flowers deathly still as though they were part of the blossoms.

She wandered aimlessly through the tall grass and soon came upon a patch of wild strawberries. She slowly sat down, spreading her skirt about her, plucked a fat red berry with her fingers and placed the berry in her mouth. The fruit was sweet-sour, tangy. She swallowed it soon, and remained on the grass, her black hair blowing in the lulling breeze, her young face bathed by the warm rays of the sun.

It was Spring. Things were alive and moving. Ants and bees were working, a bird sang on the branch of a bending pine, and flowers were curtsying like lovely young princesses. Everywhere was sunshine and sweet clean smells and rich vivid colors . . . blues of the sky, greens of the grass, and purples and yellows of the wild flowers. Here on the top of the hill she felt the world was hers and all the riches of the world belonged to her. She was young and free and filled with fresh loves and desires, no harm could come to her, no hand could strike her down, no pain could wrinkle up her brow.

Though it was spring and a quiet breeze swept over the hills, the sun was hot, blazing, orange. The sun was hot, and her feet yearned to dance, and she jumped up from the grass and raced across the hills with the tender wind. Her hair spraying out behind her, she ran and ran until her breath came short. She stopped and found herself standing on the crest of the hill overlooking a fertile valley. Down below were horses plowing across the field, turning up dark brown loam, sweating under a hot sun. She saw her father holding the horses' reins in his huge hands. His grey shirt flapped like wings in the breeze. She saw a woman trudging through the deep furrows behind her father. Her mother, with a pail of water on her arm and a wide-brimmed bonnet shading her eyes from the cruel sun, slowly followed the plow. She knew her mother's arms ached from the strain, and that her father's back was shot through with quick spurts of pain, and that the same flaring rays of sun that lay on her back were falling onto her parents' bodies.

It was late Spring. She descended the sloping hill. She took the same steps as her parents and floundered across the open furrows.

Something within her cried out, something was beating against her skull and pricking the tissues of her brain. Something needled her fingertips. The sun was scorching and the vast fields were endless and the broken ground was rough and tried to trip her.

For minutes she was lost in a nightmare, fighting for something solid to stand on while her body seemed to be whirling through hot air. She fought for something to grasp in her moistened hands.

"Please, Susan, please."

Someone was tugging on her arm, pulling her down, shouting at her. She could not see, for the glaring sun had blinded her vision and now blots of multi-colored light swirled before her.

"Read, Susan. Read me a story."

Frank was drawing her back from the dream.

"Read about the bird that flew over the city for the blind prince."

She was dizzy. She looked down at him with dazed eyes.

"A story?"

Her finger had stayed on the glass pane. Pulling her hand away from the window, she noticed how the stinging frost had settled on her fingertip. Her finger pricked as if a hundred needles had been pushed into the skin. The pain sprang through her blood.

"A story? You always want me to read a story. I don't feel like reading. I don't feel like reading at all."

His eyes were pleading.

"Please, Susan."

She looked down into his eyes, his deep black eyes. She couldn't, mustn't refuse him. She couldn't. Every night she read, and he loved to hear the tales of the kings and queens, their gigantic palaces and vast gardens, and tales of the naughty elves and wicked giants. She knew he loved them all as if they were breathing people.

"Read him a short one, Susan," her mother called from the stove.

But Susan, who had always thrilled to the stories equally as much as her young brother, could not open a book, could not read, for she knew then they were not real people and that they were something only to make little children happy and to tell them, explain to them, about the strange places in the world. The charm and loveliness of the stories had vanished for her, and it was as though something had lifted her bodily from childhood and placed her upon the brink of life and reality. To Susan the sleeping beauties and prince charmings were far away in their castles, hidden behind groves of bushes and tall trees. They ceased to live and walk the world, and in their places a new group of people walked, people with tired and unhappy faces.

"Set the table now, Susan! Your Pa oughtta be in here any minute now for his supper. An' remember to take the garbage out to the hens when we're through eating," her mother said.

She obeyed, wandered hypnotically about the room. She dropped a cup, placed knives at the wrong side of the plates, spilled milk over

the rim of a glass and, avoiding her mother's skeptical glare, she evaded Frank's wounded glance.

Someday she would tell him about her dream, she thought, and he would understand. He would not be hurt or angry. But she hoped he would grow up by himself and she would not have to tell him of all the pain and sorrow in the world that she had discovered in her dream.

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THE DEATH MASK OF JOHN KEATS

Robert Petty

Who could view them long, the sullen eyes,
Their falcon brightness gone? The brief strain
Of mortal rage the clay could not disguise,
The mouth so tightly sealed by life's last pain.
Wet clay pressed to dead clay,
What else is there to say,
But that a shell may house the ocean's roar,
A falcon's skull reflect a greater height
Of sun and rushing air, and yet no more
Shall either know it in its ancient flight.
From Caius Cestius hill,
Wings open still,
To cross the written waters of the night.

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