

Chapter Five

CORALS TO CUT LIFE UPON



FOR a while I stayed at Corning, and then went back to New York to start nursing in earnest. On one of my free afternoons in August, Bill and I went for a drive, and he suggested we stop in at the house of a friend of his who was a minister. All had been prepared. License and rice were waiting. And so we were married.

The first year is half taken up with love and half with planning a future together which is to endure forever. These dreams feed youthful ambitions, but they seldom can come true in their entirety. In our case the obstacles arose with undue speed.

I was not well. I was paying the cost of long hours in mother's closely confined room and of continuous overwork in the hospital. Medical advice was to go West to live, but I would not go without Bill, and he had a commission which kept him in New York. Accordingly, I was packed off to a small semi-sanitarium near Saranac where the great Dr. Trudeau, specialist in pulmonary tuberculosis, was consulted.

Existence there was depressing. A man might be talking to me one day, full of life and spirit and hope, and the next morning not appear. The dead were ordinarily removed in the quiet of the night, and the doctors made no comment. In this gloomy environment I rested, preparing myself for motherhood. The flood of treatises on child psychology had not yet started, and even the books on the care and feeding of infants were few. But I read whatever I could.

Just before it was time for the baby to be born I returned to the little apartment on St Nicholas Avenue at 149th Street, then practically suburban. Taking every precaution, we had engaged four doctors in a row. Dr Schmid had said he would perform the ceremony unless it came at night, in which case his assistant would have to take charge. The assistant had provided that, if he were not available, his assistant would be on call, and this assistant had another assistant to assist him.

When towards three o'clock one morning I felt the first thin, fine pains of warning, Bill tried one after the other of our obstetricians—not one could be located. He had to run around the corner to the nearest general practitioner. Due almost as much to this young doctor's inexperience as to my physical state, the ordeal was unusually hard, but the baby Stuart, given Amelia's family name, was perfectly healthy, strong, and sturdy. I looked upon this as a victory, although it was only partial, because I had to go right back to the mountains. It was a wrench to leave again so soon and at such a time, but I could not believe it would be for long.

With Stuart and a nurse I took rooms in a friendly farmhouse near a small Adirondack village, I did not want the baby in the midst of sick people, and, moreover, I was not welcome at Saranac itself, since Dr Trudeau did not like to have in residence patients whose illness had progressed beyond a certain stage. One of the most important parts of the treatment was stuffing with food. I was being filled with the then recognized remedy, creosote, and gulped capsule after capsule, which broke my appetite utterly. Still I had to pour down milk and swallow eggs, and always I had to rest and rest and rest.

At the end of eight months I was worse instead of better, and had no interest in living. Nan and Bill's mother were summoned, and two of Dr Trudeau's associates came to see me. They advised that I should go nearer Saranac and be separated from all personal responsibilities.

"What would you yourself like to do?" they asked.

"Nothing."

"Where would you like to go?"

"Nowhere."

"Would you like to have the baby sent to your brother, or would you rather have your mother-in-law take it?"

"I don't care"

To every suggestion I was negative I was not even interested in my baby

The two doctors left The younger, however, apparently not satisfied with the professional attitude, returned almost immediately, not so much in a medical capacity as one of anxious friendliness I was still sitting in the same state of listlessness He laid his hand on my shoulder quietly, but I had all the feeling of being violently shaken "Don't be like this!" he exclaimed "Don't let yourself get into such a mental condition Do something! Want something! You'll never get well if you keep on this way"

I could not sleep that night I had been rudely jolted from my stupor by the understanding doctor Obviously preparations were being made for a lingering illness which would terminate in death But if I had to die I would rather be with those I loved than disappear in the night as a part of the cold routine

As the first glimmer of dawn appeared through the curtains I got up and stared at the steadily ticking clock It was not yet five I dressed quickly, then tiptoed into the bedroom where the nurse and baby were slumbering soundly I roused her and told her to pack up, we were going back to New York She looked up in drowsy dismay, but obeyed meekly The farmer hitched up his horse and we joggled along all the way to the station in the early summer morning, bright with sunshine and cheery with birds

Bill was waiting at the Grand Central Terminal, quite naturally perplexed He had that morning received two telegrams, one saying I was to be removed to Saranac at once, pending his approval as to the care of the baby by relatives, and the other from me asking him to meet me because I was coming home I told him as best I could the reasons for my sudden decision Though I probably sounded incoherent he understood and, instead of scolding, soothed me tenderly and exclaimed, "You did just the right thing I won't let you die"

"And don't make me eat! Don't even mention food to me!" He promised to let me have my own way

At the small family hotel in Yonkers in which we settled, I lived

pretty much by myself, keeping the baby and everyone else away from me, I had by now learned the dangers of contact in spreading tuberculosis. Once free from the horrors of invalidism and comforted by love and devotion I began to regain a normal interest in life, and by the end of three weeks had recovered from my hysterical rejection of food.

As soon as I was strong enough we started to explore Westchester County for a home site. We wanted something more than a mere house. We wanted space, we wanted a view, we wanted a garden. At Hastings-on-Hudson we found what we sought. There on fifty acres of hillside overlooking the river about ten families—doctors, teachers, college professors, scientists—had combined to construct the sort of dwellings they liked in the environment they considered best suited for their children. We too had in mind a family and a comfortable, serene, suburban existence, and we joined this Columbia Colony, as it was called, renting a small cottage until we could build our own.

The other wives and I spent our afternoons conferring over the momentous problems of servants, gardens, and schools. If we went to town, we took the children with us, fitting them with special shoes at Coward's, introducing them to museums, libraries, or art galleries. Life centered around them. When Stuart and his little friends began to ask questions, "Where do babies come from?" I collected them and tried to answer, using the simple phenomena of nature as illustrations—flowers, frogs, fish, and animals. I still consider this approach has its place with many children, although modern sex educationists may smile at this method, thinking it old-fashioned.

None of the colony played cards. Instead, the women formed a literary club where we read papers on George Eliot, Browning, and Shakespeare, as well as on some current authors, and we had occasional political discussions. Out of this grew the Women's Club of Hastings.

It was all very pleasant, and at first I was busy and contented. The endless details of housekeeping did not seem to me drudgery, conquering minor crises was exciting. Though I was never slavishly domestic, I was inclined to be slavishly maternal. Bill was a devoted husband. He took care of me in the little ways—starting for the

train and coming back to put his head in the door and call, "It's awfully cold Don't go out without your wrap," or, if it were hot, he offered, "Give me your list and I'll send up the groceries "

I was again leading the life of an artist's family Bill was a hard worker, I can rarely remember one evening of just reading together I did the reading and he drew or painted But I was never quite sure whether we were rich or poor He possessed the finest qualities of creative genius, and with them some of its limitations and liabilities When he was paid for a big commission he brought me orchids and embroidered Japanese robes which I had no occasion to wear, and filled the house with luxuries This did not go with my practical sense If the grocery account were long unpaid, I protested, "They're beautiful Thank you, but can we afford them?"

"Certainly," and out of his pocket came tickets for the opera or theater, his chief pleasures

"But we shouldn't," I remonstrated as I ruffled a sheaf of bills before him

Nevertheless, we used the tickets

Every architect wants to embody his ideas at least once in his own home Ours was "modern" in its square simplicity and unadorned surfaces of stuccoed hollow tile, even being called a show house, people came from afar to study it It was designed to have a large nursery opening on a veranda overlooking the Hudson, a studio, a bath with each bedroom, fireplaces everywhere, and one especially capacious in the big library From this room the open stairway, forking at the lower landing with a few steps leading down into the kitchen, reached up the wall to the second story

The house took long to complete, but it was fun The moment Bill finished his work in New York he was back at it Theoretically he supervised at night and the builder built by day But when an arch did not turn out to be a perfect arch, seizing an ax, he chopped out part of it, usually pounding his fingers in the process The neighbors, careful of their pennies, held their ears at the clatter and clamor and exclaimed, "There goes another partition" When the contractor returned in the morning he found his previous day's work demolished Some portions were entirely done over two or three times

The color on the woodwork we applied ourselves by artificial light, plumped on our knees or stretching high overhead. If the effect were wrong, we had to match it all up again. Evening after evening we labored on the rose window which was to crown with radiance the head of the staircase. Far into the night we leaded and welded together every glowing petal. Our fingers were cut, our nerves were irritated, our eyes fatigued. But tireless love went into the composition of this rose window which symbolized the stability of our future. We were aiming at permanence and security, and our efforts seemed to be fused into indestructible unity. It was our key-stone of beauty.

After the tedious worrying over details we suddenly became too impatient to wait any more, and, in spite of the raw condition of the house, late one February afternoon of half-sleet, half-rain, a moving van pulled up to our front door. Through the semi-twilight boxes, crates, and barrels were carted in.

The four-year-old Stuart was not well. We put him early to bed, and Bill stirred up a roaring fire in the furnace against the increasing cold. Then with hammer and claw we turned to our treasures, which we had not seen for such a time. It was like opening packages on Christmas morning. We had almost forgotten the tapestry Mary had sent from Persia, the rug from Egypt, Bill's paintings. "What's in this box? Oh, look here! See what I've found!" A flood of color inundated us. We tried out their warmth against our immaculate walls and floors. I was carrying my second baby and was tired hours before I wanted to stop. As I climbed up to bed I gazed down happily on the litter below.

Some time later I heard dimly through my sleep a pounding, and woke to realize it was the German maid at the door, crying, "Madam. Come! Fire in the big stove!"

We jumped out of bed. Acrid smoke was in our nostrils, and we were swept by the horror of fire by night. Bill shouted to me, "Get right out! I've got to give the alarm!"

Away he rushed in his pajamas, there was no telephone within half a mile. I seized Stuart from his crib, bedclothes and all. This took only a few seconds, but the kitchen was already ablaze and flames were leaping up the staircase. I pulled the blanket over his

head and started cautiously down, hugging the outer side. The blistering treads crunched as they gave under my feet, but did not collapse until I had reached the smoke-filled library.

The family across the street welcomed us in. When I had tucked Stuart into an impromptu bed I went to watch. Not merely was the fire engine trying to get up the icy hill, two steps forward and one back, but the whole village was accompanying it to help organize a bucket brigade.

The clouds had cleared and the bright moon was shining on the strange scene. The weather had turned much colder, and the rain had frozen into crystals which glittered on the branches of trees and shrubbery. It was unbelievably fantastic, and in that unreal setting the flames, as though directed by devilish intent, spurted only through our prized rose window. I stood silently regarding the result of months of work and love slowly disintegrate. Petal by petal it succumbed to the licking tongues of fire, one by one they fell into the gray-white snow. Fitting them together had taken so long, now relentlessly they were being pulled apart. A thing of beauty had perished in a few moments.

It was as though a chapter of my life had been brought to a close, and I was neither disappointed nor regretful. On the contrary, I was conscious of a certain relief, of a burden lifted. In that instant I learned the lesson of the futility of material substances. Of what great importance were they spiritually if they could go so quickly? Pains, thirsts, heartaches could be put into the creation of something external which in one sweep could be taken from you. With the destruction of the window, my scale of suburban values was consumed. I could never again pin my faith on concrete things, I must build on myself alone. I hoped I should continue to have lovely objects around me, but I could also be happy without them.

The next day was filled with neighbors coming to condole and offer help, and with insurance adjusters peering about and questioning. They found the too-heavy fire in the furnace had overheated the pipes around which the asbestos had not yet been wrapped. We lost a good deal because, although the house was covered, the insurance on the furniture had not been shifted to its new location,

and, moreover, many of our possessions were irreplaceable, their worth having lain in the sentiment attached to them

A personal catastrophe may in the end prove to be a public benefit. People in the community are brought together in sympathy, and learn by the experience of others how to protect themselves. After our mischance every householder in Columbia Colony began to look to his furnace and insure his home.

Our walls were fireproof, and much of the house could be saved, but it was really more disheartening than complete demolition would have been, for in the latter case we could have started to rebuild from the beginning. I admired Bill greatly for the resolute way he set about the painful business again. He went over every inch, here saying, "This board is all right," and there tearing out black pieces of charred wood. It was a dirty job, but he stuck to it. Nevertheless, paint and stain as we would, we could not quite get rid of the unmistakable and ineradicable odor which clings around a burned building, almost like the smell of death.

Next summer we moved in once more. But the house was never the same. Never could I recapture that first flush of joy.

Grant, my second son, was born almost immediately. I loved having a baby to tend again, and wanted at least four more as quickly as my health would permit. I could not wait another five years. I yearned especially for a daughter, and twenty months later my wish came true. After Peggy's birth, the doctor went downstairs and saw Bill sitting in the library with Grant in his arms and tears welling from his eyes.

"Why, what's the matter? There's a nice little girl upstairs."

"I'm thinking of this poor little boy. Margaret has wanted a girl so long—now she'll have no room in her heart for him."

Bill's fears were groundless. Grant was not supplanted, but Peggy was so satisfactory a baby that I was not particularly disappointed when my illness cropped up again and the doctor said my family must end at this point. I was quite content with things as they were.

Even as a little fellow, the sandy-haired, square-built Stuart was practical, loved sports, and had a reasoning, logical mind, always experimenting with life as well as with mechanical things. A

thorough Higgins, he had to find out for himself and prove it. He used to stamp and scold when presented with a chore, such as mowing the lawn or bringing in wood for the fireplaces, but his rebellions were brief, and, when he realized the inevitable, he turned it into a game. "Come on over," he hailed his friends. "We've lots to do. Let's get to it! We're going to have great fun."

The other boys, taken in by his enthusiastic invitations, also believed that mowing the lawn or bringing in wood were among the best games invented.

Grant was more self-conscious than Stuart, and more inarticulate, but more affectionate. He followed the baby Peggy slavishly. They were usually hand in hand, and Grant's darkness contrasted with her bright, blond hair. From the time she could talk they referred to themselves as "we." Peggy was the most independent child I have ever seen. At three she knew what she wanted and where she was going. She was vivacious, mischievous, laughing—the embodiment of all my hopes in a daughter.

Stuart typified the scientist, Grant the artist, Peggy the doer. It was maternally gratifying to wonder whether they would carry out these propensities in their later lives.

I enjoyed my literary activities along with my children, and Bill encouraged me. "You go ahead and finish your writing. I'll get the dinner and wash the dishes." And what is more he did it, drawing the shades, however, so that nobody could see him. He thought I should make a career of it instead of limiting myself to small-town interests.

Both Bill and I were feeling what amounted to a world hunger, the pull and haul towards wider horizons. For him Paris was still over the next hill. I was not able to express my discontent with the futility of my present course, but after my experience as a nurse with fundamentals this quiet withdrawal into the tame domesticity of the pretty riverside settlement seemed to be bordering on stagnation. I felt as though we had drifted into a swamp, but we would not wait for the tide to set us free.

It was hopeless to emphasize the importance of practical necessities to an artist, and consequently I decided to resume nursing in

order to earn my share We had spent years building our home and used it only for a brief while I was glad to leave when, in one of our financial doldrums, we plunged back into the rushing stream of New York life