

THE PRODIGAL CHILDREN

THEY HAD BEEN TOGETHER a great many times, on a great many beaches, in a great many restaurants, looking out over the water. The restaurants had been called by various names in various languages—they had had orchestras and dance-bands and juke-boxes and a little man who played a guitar and a girl who played an accordeon. They had been full of sailors in berets and Futurist painters, also in berets, and women in evening dress and women with monocles and women in slacks and men in tail-coats and women also in tail-coats and men with their bare feet stuck in espadrilles. This one was called Mrs. Sims' Clam House and, except for two tanned children solemnly eating strawberry ice-cream at the counter, it was entirely empty when they came in.

They moved to the small corner table overlooking the water and sat down. The table was supposed to seat four but they pulled up the clean, hard chairs and made it do for seven. They never minded things like that—they had done them many times. They were not particularly demanding—they merely wanted the best, and the new place was always the best. After a while, it got spoiled and they left and found another place. They left while the crowds were still coming and before the receivers came. But only the local people and a few summer colonists yet came to Mrs. Sims' Clam House. It was as new a place as that.

"It's frantic," said Jinny Crick, taking off her sunglasses and slipping them into the special compartment in the special handbag, "look at the boats. It's heavenly. Isn't it frantic?"

"It's a nice little place," said Beth Blake, in her rich voice. "We think it's a nice little place." She looked at the waitress. "Good-evening, Pearl," she said pleasantly. "Fish-chowder, crab-buns and the salad for all of us." She smiled. "I won't let them have anything else," she said, "even if they cry and scream for it. They mustn't have another thing."

"Well, that's all right, I guess, Mrs. Blake," said the waitress in a small, indomitable voice. "Tea, coffee or milk?"

"Black coffee, very hot, in very thick china cups," said the small man unexpectedly and deeply. His name was Harry Crandall and, though he had flown from the Coast two days before, the noise of the airplane was not quite out of his head. "But they must be thick china—diner china," he added anxiously, peering at the waitress.

"I guess we got them thick enough if that's what you want," said the waitress.

"Splendid!" said Harry Crandall. "And that is just what I want." He looked around the small, new place. "Thank God there aren't any curtains," he said. "I was afraid of red-checked ones. And matches that look like little sailors. But it isn't. No offence meant to the Navy," he added to the blond young man in ensign's uniform on the other side of Jinny Crick, "but I just don't happen to like matches that look like little sailors."

"You want some matches?" said the waitress.

"No thank you," said Harry Crandall, abstractedly, "I want no matches. I match no want-ads. I just keep rolling along." He smiled, secretly. The waitress looked at him doubtfully for a moment and then disappeared toward the kitchen.

"How was the Coast?" said Jinny Crick. "Did you see Jimmy and Mike?"

"No," said Harry Crandall, "Jimmy's in the Signal Corps. And Mike was out at Palm Springs, rewriting the story-line for 'Little Dorrit.' It's going to be Colossal's new contribution to Anglo-American friendship. They've changed it a little, of course. Little Dorrit is a waif brought up in the Romney Marshes and she takes a fishing-trawler over to Dunkerque—if you believe Mike, over the telephone. As a matter of fact, it will probably turn out to be a good picture, Mike has a knack."

"A knack and a promise," said Beth Blake. "A knack in his engine. How's the newest bride?"

"She's the best society of Cedarhurst," said Harry Crandall. "But I like Mike. I always did."

"We all love Mike," said Jinny Crick. "It's just the brides

and the clothes that get us down. The last time I saw him he had on a shirt with pores in it. But I suppose that's the Coast."

The ensign, who had been trying to follow these remarks, turning his head politely toward each speaker in turn, now addressed Harry Crandall.

"Were you out there making a picture yourself, sir?" he said, respectfully.

"No," said Harry Crandall. "This was a radio-show. Propaganda." He bit off the word.

"It must have been very good stuff, sir," said the ensign, again respectfully and attacked his chowder. The red-haired girl sitting opposite him tried to smile at him but could not catch his eye. Poor Tom—it was all her fault and she had let him in for it. But his train went at 9.38 and there wouldn't be much longer now.

All the same, she was glad that he had seen them, and seen them as they were. It would make things so much easier to explain, later on. Though older people were always hard to explain.

She sat in a little pool of silence, quite contented to be opposite Tom, while around her the swift talk flowed—the casual conversation, full of names and jokes, jumping gaps to the next new thing—the patter and the lingo. She had been brought up on it, she had been brought up on them all. It went back to French sands and the rocking sleep on trains and liners and all the wonderful people, coming in through the garden for cocktails, sitting out on the terrace and talking, coming up the stairs to the studio and making a pleasant noise. Aunt Beth and Uncle Charlie and the nice man they all called Monkey and all the others. At one time, many years ago—nearly five years ago when she was only fifteen—she had thought them the most wonderful people in the world. Then Mummy and Daddy had finally broken up and, since then, she had been away a great deal at schools and camps and colleges. So, since then, she hadn't really seen very much of them, though she had dutifully read their books and seen their plays and their paintings and their pictures in magazines—even boasted of them, now and then, at new schools, when you had to boast of

something. And they had remembered birthdays and graduations and vacations—remembered them with thoughtful and difficult presents and telegrams from California and offers of trips and week-ends that she'd stopped accepting once she began to build her life for herself. And all of that had been genuine, and she granted it. But it wasn't her kind of life any more at all.

She glanced around the table, seeing them with the hard, clear eyes of youth. It was hard to grow up and see them as they were, and yet it had to be done. Aunt Beth and Uncle Charlie—Sid Vining, the stage-designer—Harry Crandall, the writer—Jinny Crick who was always there because she was always there. They looked harmless enough and she had been fond of them all. But they were the generation that had made the trouble—and you couldn't forget about that. They had gotten the world in a mess, and it was her generation and Tom's that would have to straighten it out. They had gotten the world in a mess, they and wonderful people like them. They had shouted for peace and disarmament—they had shouted of the horrors of war—then they had turned around and shouted for war. They drank too much, they divorced too easily, they lived by a code of their own, there was no health in them. So, they ought to behave as if there were no health in them. And yet, even now, they didn't behave that way—and that was the irritating fact. They were eating, instead, with the serious and absorbed attention they always gave to good food.

"Don't tell me that's saffron," said Sid Vining, "because I wouldn't believe you. But it is."

"They get it from a little shop in Weymouth. All the way from Weymouth," said Beth Blake.

"It could be a mint, you know," said Sid Vining, earnestly, "with the food as good as this. Remember the place at St. Tropez?"

"They didn't ration gas at St. Tropez," said Jinny Crick. "That's a song-title, isn't it, Ensign?"

"I guess it really is," said Tom Finlay, smiling pleasantly. The red-haired girl felt a sudden desire to touch him, to reassure herself of his solid reality. For Sid Vining was talking now of the things that could be done with Mrs.

Sims' Clam House, and, as the others threw in their quick, light comments, the little place changed and grew. Quietly but inexorably it grew and the large cars slid up to the dock and the chattering people flooded in—the tanned men in white dinner-jackets, the pleasantly-scented women who threw their little fur wraps over the backs of the hard, bare chairs and sat on stools at the bar and thought it was quaint and darling. It grew, as places always grew, when the wonderful people came and until they left.

She wanted to pound on the table and say, "Stop it! Stop it!" But Harry Crandall caught her eye and smiled.

"What's the matter?" he said. "It isn't going to happen, you know. It couldn't any more."

"You wouldn't understand," she said. "The boats out there are real boats and they catch real fish. It isn't just a— a stage-set for——"

"For people like us?" he said. "No, the point is well taken. It isn't a stage-set any more."

"I guess I'm being rude," said the girl. "I guess maybe I am. But what was the Hotel du Cap like, at Antibes, the last time you saw it?"

"They were quartering Senegalese there," said Harry Crandall and shrugged. "Well, they had to—I wish they'd quartered more. But it was nice, out on the rocks—you must remember."

"I remember all right," said the girl. "I remember those fine old days and the screaming parties and the Russian woman who jumped out of the window. I wasn't particularly old but I remember."

"You're lucky," said Harry Crandall. "Even with that. I didn't get over till I was in the Army."

"If you want the child's point of view—well, it wasn't much fun," said the girl. "We all wanted ice-cream sodas and American clothes and movies that weren't months late. We wanted the funnies and games like the ones we read about, and not to be foreign."

"That's interesting," said Harry Crandall. "Yes, I see how that could be."

The girl stared at him. That was another thing about them that she had forgotten—they were always so open-

minded. They'd attack you for a taste, demolish you for a judgment—but not for an opinion, particularly when it was critical of them.

"I suppose that's why I used to be an isolationist," she said. "It hurt Mummy and Daddy. They couldn't understand it."

"Perfectly natural reaction," said Harry Crandall.

"But how can you say that?" said the girl. "Ever since the war first broke out, you——"

He looked at her and his face was empty and sad.

"After the last war," he said, "the one thing I swore I'd never write was propaganda. But this one is for our skins, and the chips are down." He smiled at her. "So no explanations or apologies," he said. "Have some coffee. It's good."

She tried to read the pleasant, lined, empty face. There could be nothing there of importance to her—she knew that when she looked at Tom. And yet, the eyes were alive as a prodigal child's. But the prodigal children were finished.

"And, speaking of blackouts, Beth," said Charles Blake, "as we weren't."

"Yes, we should," said Beth Blake and again, like migratory birds, they collected themselves and began to make gestures of departure. It took a little time but it was efficient and smooth. They said good-bye, carefully and politely, to Pearl, to Mrs. Sims, to the man at the counter. They looked into the kitchen for a moment, they walked out on the dock and looked at the sunset. It was obvious to the red-haired girl that they should lower their voices on the dock and be less themselves than they were, but they did nothing of the sort. It was obvious that the other people on the dock should hate them, but that did not seem to happen either.

When, at last, she and Tom were in the small car together, the girl gave a sigh of relief.

"Let's drive back by the Point, Tom," she said. "It's only half a mile further and we needn't be back right away."

"Well, they're very interesting people," said Tom, a little later, "they certainly give you something to think about." He laughed, a little nervously. "Was I all right, darling?" he said.

"You were fine," said the girl, "just fine. And you don't have to be polite."

"Well, they were polite to me," said Tom, and she saw the stubborn line of his jaw.

"They always are, while you're with them," said the girl. "Oh, don't let's quarrel," she said.

"I wasn't quarrelling, beautiful," said Tom and they both stared out over the darkening water. He was there and solid and the way she wanted him to be. And they should be talking a great deal and they were not talking at all. The wonderful people had spoiled it.

"Oh, damn them!" she said with sudden violence. "Damn them from hell to breakfast! Damn them all!"

"Why, honey," he said. "Why, honey—what's the matter?" Then his arms were around her and she should have felt safe and secure. But there was neither safety nor security anywhere, any more. The wonderful people had seen to that, long ago, when they first set a match to the world.

"Oh—it's all right," she said. "It's all right, Tom. But we've got to get to your train."

When she returned to the house, the blackout shades were already drawn and the highball tray was waiting. Beth Blake was explaining about the blackout shades.

"It's just dim-out, really," she was saying. "But we thought we'd do it rather thoroughly, since we had to." She gestured at the gay, bright flower-patterns on the inside of the shades, "Jimmy Bender thought they ought to be much more Dali," she said. "He said he'd do them over, but I don't think Dali's very cosy for a blackout. I'd hate to look at eyes and watches while I was being bombed. So we just made them pretty-pretty and now Charlie says it's like living inside a seed-catalogue." Her rich laugh rang. She turned to the red-haired girl. "I hope your young man got a seat on the train," she said. "They're so tiresomely crowded, now, especially on week-ends."

"Oh, he got one all right," said the red-haired girl. "No thanks, Uncle Charlie, not a drink right now—I just want to powder my nose."

And there goes a very nice youngster who's just seen a ghost,

thought Harry Crandall, watching her stride from the room. *But the young are so hard to reach. Were we as hard to reach as that? Well, yes, I suppose we were.*

He removed himself unobtrusively from the group and sat quietly in a corner, listening to the phonograph, his highball balanced on one knee. Charlie Blake was playing a new calypso—he always found them somehow.

“Telling you about the battle of Midway when those Japanese ships went down,” went the strange, effective voice. “Telling you about the battle of Midway when the U.S. Navy fleet went to town——”

Harry Crandall listened, glad for the fact of noise. He’d talk, if he had to, in a minute, but right now he didn’t want to talk, even to Charlie or Beth. And Charlie and Beth wouldn’t mind—they had been together long enough.

He tried to remember when he had first met the Blakes—21? 22? But it was hard to remember when you were tired. He’d met them with Steve Searle, who was dead of a heart attack, and Mimi Post, who wouldn’t get out of her sanatorium now, and a lot of the old crowd. But it had been a new crowd, then—quite new and shiny. In the days of the Dome and the Rotonda and Marta’s down in the Village and the start of many things—the days of the fierce bursts of work and the quick trips on liners—the days when Paris was Mecca and there wouldn’t be any more wars. Yes, a new crowd—quite new and shiny. And everybody had been poor, at the start, except the Blakes. But nobody minded the Blakes not being poor.

Well, he thought, we’ve had a good run for it, money or no money. We’ve had what won’t be again—the food and the talk and the wine. But France fell, dammit—France fell. She couldn’t fall but she did. And that handsome youngster probably thinks it happened because they liked good food and things in proportion. But that’s part of what you want to preserve. Not all, but part.

He looked around the room at the good faces—the faces of his friends. They had been together so often and so long and through so many happenings. The work was a different thing, that, in time could be assessed. Not such bad work either, on the whole, though no doubt it could have been

better. But he was thinking of the people, not the work. For nobody was going to be able to put in a book what Charlie Blake was like twenty years ago or why Jinny Crick, for all her mannered folly, had both charm and heart. It couldn't be put in a book or explained to the young. But these are my friends, my colleagues, my generation—the people I have chosen to live and die beside. And we went on a queer adventure, very queer when you come to think of it—for it brought us back precisely, and in twenty years, to the things we had left behind, and now we must fight for those, if anything good is to live. And after that, we'll be old. But we've seen some things.

He noticed that the red-haired girl was back in the room again, on a sofa beside Sid Vining. *Well, here goes for a rescue, he thought. She won't get on with Sid—not in whatever mood she's in—and Sid's pretty on edge himself. And I don't want Beth's party ruined—even if it's a small one.*

He approached them amiably. "Nice drinks? Nice picture-postcards, gentleman and lady?" he said. "Nice guide for the conducted tour?"

"Don't give her a drink," said Sid Vining, sourly. "She thinks it's the Demon Rum." He rose and bowed "I have been rebuked by infants," he said. "I shall now go and get myself stinking in comparative peace." He stalked away.

"Well," said Harry Crandall and sat down. The girl said nothing. "He won't, you know," said Harry Crandall, "in case you wanted information."

"Who cares if he does?" said the girl, in a low, fierce voice. Harry Crandall considered this.

"Oh—some of us—in a way," he said. "It isn't particularly good for his work. And he's about the best scene designer we've got. But he's been mostly on the wagon for quite a while, now."

"Then why doesn't he *do* something?" said the girl. "Instead of talking about putting little bars in restaurants. Why doesn't he do camouflage?"

He stared at her and laughed.

"Poor Sid," he said. "He's got a trick knee. And bad eyes. The Army's turned him down twice. Now he thinks they may take him but he isn't sure. So he's a little touchy."

"Oh," said the girl.

"Yes," said Harry Crandall. "And now I'd really better get you a drink. You've had a white face all evening and I don't like girls with white faces. Also, I need one myself. You get tired, on planes—it's the monotony, I guess."

He mixed two drinks, expertly, thinking, *Harry Crandall, the rescuer, Harry Crandall, the life guard! Aren't you proud of yourself, Mr. Harry Fix-it Crandall? But Howdy and Ella Martinson were friends of yours and swell people, so the least you can do is to get their daughter a drink at a party. That will help so much.*

When he brought them back, the girl looked at hers doubtfully.

"I don't really like it," she said.

"I am not attempting to inebriate you," said Harry Crandall, patiently. "I am recommending for shock. And don't tell me you haven't had one."

"I haven't," said the girl, but she sipped at the very light highball.

"Of course not," said Harry Crandall. "Your generation doesn't. You live on milk and pepsi-cola and grow to be six-foot three. Which is perfectly fine and I'm for it. But nobody's shockproof, these days. Nobody at all."

"It wasn't anything at all," said the girl, but the colour began to come back to her white face.

"Of course it wasn't anything," said Harry Crandall.

"It was just driving back through the blackout," said the girl, "I mean, it takes quite a long time. I—I didn't realize it would take so long. It was *spooky!*" she said, with hurt.

"That so?" said Harry Crandall. "Yes, that must make tough driving." He did not say, "In the last war, I remember the first time we moved with lights, after the Armistice. I remember that because it hit you right in the face—it scared you for a minute. And I remember how London looked, at the start of this one." He did not say any of those things.

"And then I came back——" said the girl. "And I'd just seen Tom off—and Aunt Beth was talking about blackout shades and being silly—and I went upstairs to powder my nose in her bedroom—and she's got a very bright tin

pail full of very white sand—and I guess it matches the bedroom—and oh!——”

“Nobody will notice it, if your cry,” said Harry Crandall. “Or we could go out in the kitchen. People often do.”

“I’m not going to cry!” said the girl. “But it suddenly got rather horrible. And Aunt Jinny—Mrs. Crick—was in the bedroom. She was sitting there in a chair and she was crying. But she wasn’t making any sound—just the tears coming out of her eyes. And I stood there like a fool and didn’t know what to do!” Her voice rose sharply.

“That’s quite all right,” said Harry Crandall, carefully. “You see, Jinny has a boy in the Coastal Patrol. You played with him once but you probably wouldn’t remember him—his name’s Sam Langley and he’s even taller than you are. Red hair, too,” he said reflectively. “Well, you see how that might worry her. And then Toby Crick’s in London for Lease-Lend, and she’s rather fond of Toby.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel like even more of a heel, you’re succeeding very nicely.” said the girl.

“Oh, no,” said Harry Crandall. “No, I’m not claiming the higher maternal virtues for Jinny—in fact, I’d hate to be mothered by her, myself. But I’d hate not to have her around, with her silly square make-up box, making up her silly face and worrying about it. You get to be that way about people, after a while, and its been a long while.”

He sighed, for a moment. “So you fought with your young man,” he said.

“I didn’t fight with him,” said the girl. “It was just—it was going to be wonderful—and then suddenly, it didn’t mean anything.”

“You can’t go entirely by one week-end,” said Harry Crandall, remarking that the girl’s colour had now returned to normal. *And, Old Mother Hubbard, how did you pull that well-worn advice right out of the hat,* he thought.

“You don’t understand,” said the girl. “You couldn’t, possibly! It’s got to be right for me—after Mummy and Daddy and the way they broke up! It’s got to be safe and secure! Something’s got to be! And I thought Tom was and I was counting on that. I thought not even Aunt Beth and the rest of you could spoil him. And then——”

"And then," said Harry Crandall, "we exerted our well-known wiles?"

"Oh, it isn't what you did," said the girl. "You never do. But you made him look dull—and ordinary—and he was respectful to you—so horribly respectful——"

"In other words," said Harry Crandall, "he was polite." He cleared his throat. *I wish I could remember more about that young man*, he thought. *He was perfectly all right and I liked him but I never could pick him out in a parade.* "And as for his being dull," he said guardedly, "I thought he had some pretty solid ideas."

"Yes, that's Tom," said the girl, eagerly. She pulled her handkerchief from her handbag and firmly blew her nose. "And they're real ideas, too. He thinks there are going to be a lot of changes after the war and we'll all have to be more responsible."

"That's an interesting point of view," said Harry Crandall. *All the same, she'd better meet young Sam Langley*, he thought. *This Tom may be all she thinks but he ought to have more competition. And the first time you fall in love you're always so sure it's for keeps.* He cocked his ear to what the girl was saying now.

"But I can't get over being so scared," she said, like a child. "Why was I?"

"There's a war on," said Harry Crandall, "and a big one. And you can forget for a while, just the way you can almost go to sleep on a march. But, now and then, it comes over you, like a wave. It isn't a question of courage and it doesn't affect your doing things. You drove the car back all right—didn't you? You didn't drive it into a ditch? Well—that's all you have to know."

"Yes, that's so," she said gratefully. "I didn't drive it into the ditch."

"Remember that," said Harry Crandall, "because there was a big car and it got in the ditch. And now we've got to get it out. Not just your generation or mine," he said carefully, "but all of us. That's the difference. Do you hate us all very much? You might, you know. After all, we did have the parties."

"I don't know," said the girl. "I don't know."

"As for me, I'm entirely vulnerable," said Harry Crandall. "This is Charlie's last leave and Beth's going to shut the house. But I'm everything you think. I'm a nasty little civilian propagandist and will the new crowd make hay of that, in ten years' time, when it's all over? Remember the fearsome tripe the established names—or most of them—wrote about the last one and how it retched the bowels of my generation? Well, they'll retch at me, just the same way. But somebody had to do it." He spoke without heat or pride.

"I don't understand you," said the girl. "I don't understand any of you. I don't know that I want to."

"It doesn't matter a bit," said Harry Crandall. "Only maybe you'd better. If you're going to make a new world, and I gather you are." He looked at her, glad to see her so stiff and uncompromising. "Well, we were, too," he said. "And it wasn't a bad one. It had freedom and pleasure and good food and truthful art. But we had to make our own rules and we couldn't see around the next curve. So that's that, and what happened, happened." He stared at his drink. "And you'll do it very differently," he said.

"I should hope so," said the girl.

"That's all right," said Harry Crandall. "But remember that freedom means freedom, not bossing other people—and your friends, in the end, are your friends.

"With which profound remark," he said, "your cracker-barrel philosopher will now sign off." He finished his drink and stood up.

"Let's go outside for a minute," he said. "Charlie's got a perfectly devilish blackout arrangement on the terrace door, but I think I know my way through it."

When they were outside, in the cool darkness, the girl took a deep breath.

"It smells nice," she said. "It smells good. Even in wars."

"Yes," said Harry Crandall, gently. "You'll sleep, of course?" he said.

"Why, of course I'll sleep," said the girl. "Why shouldn't I?"

He chuckled faintly to himself. "No reason," he said. *But you're over your jitters, he thought, and you won't have the same kind again. You'll sleep like a baby and wake, and to-*

morrow you'll write to Tom, or he'll write to you. And you'll marry him or somebody, but it won't be me, thank goodness, for I've chosen the friends I must live and die beside. And we're getting on, every one of us, but we've got about one more kick in us and those that are left are tough. No, we won't be easy, in your Zion. But we'll try to behave. We're trying.

“Born and bred in the brier-patch, Brer Fox,” he said, half to himself. “Born and bred in the brier-patch and now we're back there again. But we did take life with both hands—we weren't cautious about it. And that's still something to do.”

But the girl was still standing there, breathing in the night, a tall, confident figure, beneath the calm sky that sometime might hold the planes. He smiled, nodded his head and went back to the house and his friends.