

Chapter Twelve

But joy is a knave, short-lived. Even before she saw Elspeth or the baby, Cordelia was pestered with the idea as to just how to present this overwhelming news to the town. It would never be forgotten. In the annals of history this one event would always be remembered in Ashton. "That was the Spring when the old maid Elspeth Newman shocked the town by having a baby...."

Elspeth lay in a room filled with six other nursing mothers. Cordelia was shocked. Elspeth should have had a private room. She herself had had one. They could have scraped the money together somehow. But seeing her there, pale, her hair matted and her hands oddly clenched, Cordelia forgot everything and went to her.

"Pretty as a picture," Cordelia said.

Elspeth slowly turned to her.

"The baby, I'm talking about." A little lie didn't hurt anything. She hadn't even seen the baby, of course.

Elspeth smiled wanly.

"Whatdoya want to do with this here?" asked Hattie, holding up John Henry's suitcase.

"Just leave it be," said Cordelia. "The nurse will take care of it."

"If you say so," said Hattie. "How you, Elsbuth?"

"Hello, Hattie. I'm just fine." Elspeth's eyelids quivered.

"Here come the nurse," said Hattie.

The nurse was smiling. "Mrs. Newman," she said to Elspeth, "have you decided on a name?"

Cordelia spoke right up. "I need to speak with you a minute, nurse. Something private."

The nurse regarded Cordelia with mascaraed blue eyes.

"Just come with me."

Outside in the hall Cordelia told the nurse that Elspeth was not thinking clearly just now, but the two of them had discussed it for days now. "If it's a girl my daughter wants to name it 'Elspeth'. Elspeth Rutledge Newman."

The nurse wrote the name, asking how to spell "Elspeth". Cordelia smiled, wondering just how many Elspeths there had been down the line. She would have to find her book and look that up when she got home. That was another thing she would tell Ashton--- "There are at least twenty Elspeths in our line," she would say, showing of course that they had

traditions in her noble lineage.

"There she is!"

Cordelia recognized the nurse from her room upstairs immediately. She felt like an escaped felon and turned from the two nurses who were approaching her with consternation on their youthful faces.

"Mrs. Newman!" the older of the two nurses reproached Cordelia.

"Yes?" Cordelia stood taller.

"This is against the rules of the hospital. We've been looking everywhere."

The younger nurse took Cordelia by the elbow. "Now let's just go on back to your room. You supposed to be quiet, hon."

"My daughter has just given birth to a fine young girl. Her name is Elspeth."

The nurses did not appear to be interested.

"I don't want Elspeth to know--that I've been ill, you know. It might worry her and she won't be able to nurse."

The nurses said they would not tell anyone but that Cordelia should be in her room.

"Elspeth Rutledge Newman," pronounced the nurse in charge of Elspeth. "Is that right?" Except she pronounced the word "rat".

Cordelia regarded the other two nurses for approval of the name. There was none, only the consternation.

She walked in silence with the nurses back to her room.

The younger nurse applied the needle again. "Now if you're not gone be a good little lady we'll have to fasten you down. And we won't like that one little bit, will we?"

"I'll sue," said Cordelia. "It would give me great pleasure to sue this wretched place."

"We're not all that bad, are we? But hospitals got to have their rules and patients can't be running up and down the halls. Now, can they?"

Cordelia said nothing. But the thought occurred to her that it might be a good way to earn some money. She could sue for unnecessary restraints. She would sit on the witness stand, not a fear in her body, and tell the jury that she was restrained from seeing her first grandbaby and her only daughter. But then the thought played in her mind that she would then have to bring out the circumstances of little Elspeth's birth. So the plan was aborted immediately and here she was back in this green room, bored to death and without a single thing to do but think of her grandchild whom she had not seen. The baby was just lying there without a loved one about anywhere.

But then her blood pressure ^{practically} shot up fifty points. May Beth Hughes was peaking in the room, a good Samaritan visiting the sick.

"Peek-a-boo, it's just me." May Beth Hughes's made-up face was sticking through the half-open door. "Can I come in for just a little visit?"

She wants to know about Elspeth, thought Cordelia. She

felt helpless, as if she were lying in a casket and everyone was staring at her, every feature, every fault. "Come in, May Beth." She purposely made her voice sound thin, sick.

May Beth was wearing an ultra-suede sky blue suit. A white scarf was round her neck and she looked like a fool. People in their sixties ought not to even try, Cordelia was thinking. No fool like an old fool.

May Beth sat in the low arm chair near the high bed, but again the chair was so low Cordelia had to sit up to see the woman and even with two pillows the gesture was a strain she could have done without.

"I could have diided," May Beth was saying. "You and Elspeth both in the hospital. Just heard it downtown and got myself straight up here. How are you?" She frowned at Cordelia, searching her face.

Cordelia had not combed her hair yet and she knew she looked like a wild woman. "My blood pressure's high and I fainted here at the hospital. I don't even have a comb."

"I'll get you one," said May Beth. "How's Elspeth?"

That was the real reason for the visit. Elspeth. May Beth did not care that she had high blood pressure and had fainted. "Elspeth's fine." There was no way out but to tell her about the baby. "I have a beautiful granddaughter, May Beth. Her name is Elspeth. At least fifteen in the family, you know. Elspeth is a family name, has been for centuries."

May Beth sat straight up in the chair and clapped her

hands. "A gull!" she said. "How wonderful!"

May Beth Hughes did not think it was wonderful at all. She wouldn't like it if her own daughter had had an illegitimate daughter. (Though May Beth had no daughter.) All the same her little clapping and chatter was an act. Cordelia looked away from her.

"Be happy, Cordelia. It's not the baby's fault."

"What isn't the baby's fault?" Cordelia stared at her. ^{May Beth's} ~~her~~ face had suddenly fallen. She looked odd.

"Well, you know."

"May Beth, I want to tell you that Elspeth is broad."

May Beth regarded Cordelia, her mouth a round O. "What do you mean, Cordelia?"

"I mean Elspeth isn't like you and me. She's broad, sophisticated, a woman of the world. She wanted this baby and now she has it. The world's changed. I've never been prouder--or happier, as you say."

May Beth looked out the window, a slight smile on her face. All one saw out the window were telephone wires and the tip of a cedar tree dying of bag worms. May Beth turned back to Cordelia. "Elspeth's always been different."

Cordelia lay back on the pillows. "Such a small town."

"Ashton?"

"Yes," Cordelia said emphatically. The red means were rising within her. She wanted the woman to get out of the room, go back downtown and spray-paint her foul gossip, tell it to the world: The Spinster Elspeth Just Had a Baby!

"The county's growing," May Beth said. "I don't even know those people in our church. Half of them. Who are they, do you suppose?"

"I have no idea." Cordelia purposely pitched her voice a decible lower. She wanted the woman OUT!

May Beth appeared to respond. "Well, I better be going on now. Want to get a present for the baby and get you a comb and such. When do you think you'll be going home?"

"In a day or two. Elspeth will be bringing little Elspeth home by Thursday at least."

May Beth stood. "So fliine," she said. She patted the bed. "Now you take care of yourself, Cordelia. Don't worry about a thing. That's bad for your pressure. Worrying about things."

The first thing Cordelia saw when they returned home was the letter. It was atop the bills, magazines and catalogues. The mailman always acted out ~~at~~ the courtesy of putting personal mail above the regular mail. And so there it was. Cordelia grabbed it as Hattie, Elspeth and the screaming baby made their way up the stairs.

The letter was from Robert, addressed to Elspeth. She hadn't expected he would answer. But she hoped the letter spelled money. That was the reason she had written him at all. This crying colicky baby needed support. And it would be some time before Elspeth could return to work, if the job was still there.

"I'll be up in a minute," she called to Elspeth.

There was no response. Elspeth had suffered the "baby blues". For a while she did not even want to see the infant. She lay in the woman's ward a picture of grey despair with the nurses practically tap dancing trying to cheer her up. Finally the doctor administered medication and Elspeth seemed to rally.

Since then she appeared fond enough of the baby. And why shouldn't she? Cordelia immediately recognized her own features on the child. She was the spitting image of her own baby pictures. In time she would have dark hair and blue eyes, though the eyes might change. She hoped not. Throughout life people had told Cordelia that the combination of dark hair and blue eyes was an appealing combination.

The one thing Elspeth was still angry about was the name of the child. She threw a fit when the nurse informed her the baby was named Elspeth Rutledge. But Cordelia reasoned that her anger was because she was experiencing depression. Elspeth claimed she was going to call the child "Rutledge" and the nurses kept referring to the baby as "little Rut." Cordelia was adamant. This baby was "little Elspeth." And she said it so often the name stuck.

But the letter. Cordelia went into the library and immediately slit open the letter with her grandfather's silver opener:

My dear El:

Imagine a married man calling another woman "My dear."
Cordelia reread:

My dear El:

I have your mother's letter of March 20. What can I say? I have been pondering and pondering just how to inform ~~Elsa~~^{Abigail}, my wife, that I am to be a father. She knows nothing of our relationship but that, too, will have to be taken care of at the appropriate time.

My emotions about all of this are so confused--- pain for you and, I think, for myself. I wish that it could have been different. Our lives are not predestined and to think so is probably the greater sin.

I must see you and the baby one day. Please take care of yourself and not think too harshly of the man you once professed to love so deeply. I am that same man and I know where my responsibilities are. To my wife. To my child. And to my dear friend, which you are.

As always,
Robert

Cordelia tore up the letter into angry pieces. Not one word about money! "Responsibilities." What did that mean? And he was coming here. The latter sent a chill of fear in her. What would he say to Elspeth about the letters? What would Elspeth say to her?

It was frightening. And she listened to the howls of the baby upstairs. It was fighting life as Elspeth herself had fought some thirty years ago. Would the child turn out like Elspeth? With no father. No money. Nothing. It was all too chilling and Cordelia stared at the torn pieces of paper as if they held the future in their tattered design.

"Baby don't like this world."

Cordelia heard Hattie philosophizing as she reached the

landing upstairs. Odd, she was thinking something of the same thing about the baby. She had come upstairs to see why Elspeth was unable to quiet the child.

Elspeth and Hattie had the baby lying in the middle of one of the guest beds. The room was enormous, not meant for a baby. Elspeth had nothing in preparation, of course. Cordelia thought of the old-fashioned crib in the attic, the same one she had used for Elspeth.

"Hattie, lets find the crib upstairs." Which meant Hattie would fetch the necessary things. Cordelia was too tired to climb the stairs and drag the heavy crib down. "And, Elspeth, lets put the baby in the sewing room."

Elspeth did not answer. She picked up the baby, patting its tiny back. Cordelia watched, all the time thinking Elspeth looked like white trash. Her stockings were rolled down at her ankles and her hair was uncombed. She looked puffy and her stomach was still prominent above her thin white legs.

"If we put her in the sewing room we can both look after her." Cordelia was thinking she would buy curtains and cheer up the sewing room. Pink curtains would be nice for a little girl and she would make ruffles for the dresser and paint the little bureau drawer white. Elspeth would never think of such things. A baby needed to be cozy, not be placed in an adult guest room. Elspeth knew nothing of domesticity.

"Now there," Elspeth said as the baby quieted.

Bang. Bang. Hattie and the crib both fell down the attic steps.

Cordelia gasped and Elspeth nearly dropped the baby.

Hattie was trying to stand. Cordelia helped her, at the same time spying the crib. It was badly scratched but still intact.

"Are you all right?" Cordelia asked.

"Heel caught," Hattie said, looking down at herself as if she were trying to discover breakage.

Nothing is right in this house, Cordelia thought. Why should such a tiny creature cause such havoc? No one knew what to do. The two of them, Elspeth and Hattie, were waiting for her, Cordelia, to make things right. She saw the handwriting as clear as the hand before her. She had to be the foreman here: tell everybody what to do and when. It was she who would wash and fold the diapers, buy talcum powder, find a basinette, buy the proper soap and oils. It was all too much and here she was dying of blood pressure. Didn't Elspeth ever think of anyone but herself?

She started to say just that. But there was no use. It had always been so. She had done everything for John Henry, too. John Henry and Elspeth lived in other worlds, dream worlds where only ideas mattered. The practical world somehow got done by itself, as far as they were concerned.

Elspeth placed the baby on one of the large twin beds again. And Cordelia climbed the attic steps to find linens for the crib. Hattie was unable to do anything. Her toe

was broken, she said. But Cordelia noted she walked without a limp.

The precious baby blankets and sheets were just where she had placed them years ago--in her mother's old trunk-wardrobe, wrapped in blue tissue paper. Only the pins had rusted.

All at once she had a rush of emotion for the loss of her mother. She wanted more than anything for her mother to appear, fix everything, soothe her with sensible talk and comfort. The baby blankets were the very ones used by her as a baby, the ribbons sewn by her mother and grandmother. She carefully unwrapped the tissue and placed the white and pink garment to her cheek. She had been dearly loved. Once.

But now was no time for sentiment. It was time for action, not feeling. She gathered up the blankets, small sheets and pillows with the cases still on them and haltingly made her way down the stairs. It was then, for no reason whatsoever, that she thought of Robert and his letter and "responsibilities."

She went straight into the bedroom and fiercely stared down at little Elspeth. There was nothing of the man in that face. Strange. Girls usually looked like their fathers. Perhaps in time something foreign would appear. But for now this child was hers and, maybe, a little of John Henry. She saw nothing of Elspeth in the child either. Except the constant crying, the mouth twisted in its misery,

informing all that it was, indeed, a rotten world.

When she could stand it no longer she went downstairs and took up her pen at her desk. She would have to inform Robert just what his "responsibilities" were. She would hint at lawyers and government officials. His child could not be brought up wanting. She might even suggest divorce ~~x~~ THIS!

Dear Robert:

You are the father of a beautiful baby girl, born May 30 here in Ashton. Her name is Elspeth Rutledge Newman. You see, we thought the child should have the same name as her mother. And, of course, you know why that is.

I am writing for Elspeth since she suffered so. She almost died bringing your baby into the world. And afterward the doctors and nurses were fearful she might take her life. She suffered great depression, you see. But we all rallied, cheering her on and now she is able to care for the baby a little each day.

You spoke of "responsibilities" in your letter to Elspeth. (She read me your letter.) She, of course, asks nothing from you. But I am of a more practical nature. I am a realist and of old-fashion beliefs. I do think it is absolutely necessary for you to bear financial support, since you are incapable of giving emotional support to your child and its mother.

Please write to me since Elspeth's emotional strength is still fragile and letters to her from you bring back too many sorrows and pain to all of us.

Sincerely,
Cordelia Newman

It was a good letter, she thought on re-reading. There were some stretches of the truth. All in all Elspeth had had a rather easy delivery taking in account her age and that this was her first child. But she didn't think it

would hurt anything for the man to know what a woman suffers, especially a sensitive person like Elspeth. He needed to suffer some himself.

All of it was so discouraging--their financial circumstances. She thought of letting Hattie go, but her little salary wouldn't help very much and besides she needed her in this large house to help out, if not physically then emotionally. She didn't know what she would do without Hattie. The thought ran through her mind that Hattie might work for free. They were such good friends and Hattie had been with the family for so long. She thought she might ask her this little favor.

But for now she read the letter again, sealed it and addressed it. Just writing the man's name felt evil. She was consorting with evil and the head of evil was the devil.

"Devil," she said aloud and saw Robert's face, grinning. His mouth grinned but his dark eyes beamed an evil light. She would have to see to it that little Elspeth had nothing of her father in her. She would be all Southern; the sloth of New York would be a mere news story, a world her granddaughter would never know.

The telephone rang, a foreign sound in the house. It was Sarah Whitfield asking her to attend a meeting of the Garden Club.

"We just don't see enough of you lately," said Sarah.

The Garden Club was the most prominent gathering in all of Ashton. There were only fifteen members, each one

representing the finest families in Ashton, if not Georgia. The members were growing older as were the families. New members were black-balled time and time again. All the new families were lacking. Therefore the Club was in dire danger of becoming extinct like birds and fowl one read about.

Cordelia was delighted to attend the Club again. There had been no glamour whatsoever in her life for months now.

"I've been hospitalized, Sarah," Cordelia said.

"I know, dear," Sarah Whitfield said in a tone of mournful understanding. Sarah Whitfield was slender, pretty and from Charleston. Cordelia wondered if Sara could be feeling sorry for her and therefore was being merely kind.

"But you've got a brand new grandbaby," Sarah said.

For a second Cordelia had almost forgotten she had a grandchild. She was living in the Garden Club world, not the world of illegitimacy. She hesitated, but only for a moment: "We are sooo happy, Sarah."

"We are so happy for you," said Sarah.

Cordelia wondered who "we" was. They were all talking, everyone in town. Well, she would face it, conquer it like the fighter she was.

"Cutest thing," she said.

"I want to see her." Sarah dismissed the child with the fact that she knew Cordelia wanted to renew her membership in the Club now that everything had settled down.

"Yes, I think I can now."

"How is Elspeth?"

Again hesitation. Cordelia started to say Elspeth was fine, but Sarah interrupted:

"Cordelia," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. "We all want you to know we understand."

"Understand what, Sarah?" She knew perfectly well what she was referring to.

"The circumstances and all."

Cordelia had always admired Sarah Whitfield. She came from one of the most prominent families in Charleston. Cordelia considered Sarah Whitfield a fine friend of hers, very choice. She could confide in her.

"It's a tragedy, Sarah." Her voice was deep.

"Oh, Cordelia. Think of it this way: you've got a precious new life to enjoy. You and Elspeth will be very happy in time. You'll see."

"It's a tragedy all the same." Cordelia was experiencing something new. It was rather heady being a tragedy. People were kinder, wanting to help her and by doing so they, too, would feel this inward glow. As if she, Cordelia, were giving them the glow. Reciprocity.

"There's never been anything like this in our family," Cordelia said. "We've named her 'Elspeth.'"

"Lovely," trilled Sarah Whitfield. "I do admire traditions."

"We've suffered. Elspeth and I. The man, you know, was only a fortune seeker."

Sarah cleared her throat. "I know it's been difficult, Cordelia. But sometimes difficulty triumphs, they say."

Cordelia said that was so and abruptly changed the subject. She was looking forward to seeing everyone again, she said. They had had to live such sheltered lives these past months. "I need a little cheering up, Sarah."

Sarah said she understood.

But when Cordelia reached the Whitfield house she found everyone too cheery as if they were in a play, fawning over her, never mentioning the baby, or Elspeth, but flattering her: how well she looked, how actually pretty she looked.

She had the distinct feeling she had done something terribly wrong, so wrong that the deed could never be mentioned but must be glossed over like paint on a rotten board.

The Club was not a federated club. It was merely a group of friends who were "high society" and who also liked to garden. They met each month at various houses and told what they had done with their gardens the previous month.

"I haven't done one thing," said Jane Hammermill.

Most of the members hadn't done "one thing." Secretly, Cordelia believed that every member there despised the Club but went because being left out would mean a disgrace of sorts. So they attended the meetings, declaring they had done nothing but "fertilize and the usual things." Once Cordelia tried to bring up the subject of organic gardening but no one was interested. They were too far advanced in

the world to get anything like cancer. Besides, they didn't honestly believe anything like organic gardening would save them from such a fate.

When it came time for Cordelia to announce what she had been doing she was a full mind to tell them. She would say she had been drinking to forget the disgrace her daughter had brought on her and that she had been running up and down stairs, hauling furniture and diapers from one room to the other. And that she was dying of blood pressure and Elspeth didn't care. Nobody cared.

"My camillias were the loveliest they've ever been this year," she said instead.

"It's been a wonderful year for camellias," said Sarah Whitfield and everyone agreed.

"I've done a little weeding," continued Cordelia. "Just can't seem to stay ahead of them. I'm a good mind to get some of that weed killer but they say it's dangerous."

"I use it all the time," said Jane Hammermill.

Jane Hammermill had just had an eyelid lift and she looked as if she were in perpetual shock. She regarded Cordelia as if she were suddenly seeing a thief in wild-eyed fear.

Cordelia almost told her to stop looking at her that way, but she couldn't, of course. "I guess that's all I've been doing," she said mournfully. Everyone was staring at her. They didn't care about her weeds. They only cared about Elspeth and the baby and the man who got away.

Cordelia wished she hadn't come.

When the meeting was finally over she came home to a silent and empty house. A note from Elspeth said she and Hattie had taken little Elspeth to the pediatrician to see what could be done about the attacks of colic. They would be home as soon as they could.

The silence was welcoming. Her first outing had been such a strain she decided to relieve it by having a calm little drink before Elspeth returned. That way she could think about the meeting and all her troubles in a quiet way. For days now she felt she was running around like a steam engine. She needed solitude and the little drink to rest in.

She poured a two jigger drink of bourbon and ceremoniously brought it into the library and rested it on the table by her usual chair, the Chippendale. The chair had been her mother's and somehow it, too, appeared to soothe her. It was like sitting on her mother's lap as she had done as a child.

Except she was no child. She reached for the glass of amber liquid and, as she knew it would, her being was soon filled with charity, kindness and goodness. The girls at the Club had truly been nice in their way. She was, indeed, happy to be amongst her people, her kind again. It seemed she had been surrounded by odd people for months now, strangers like the nurses and people in waiting rooms. It was good to be back to normal again.

The telephone rang, and it no longer sounded like a foreign sound, just one more testimony to the fact she was healing.

She picked up the phone. "Hel-looooo," she answered happily, but a foreign tongue met her joy.

"What?" she half hollered.

"Un moment, s'il vous plait."

"Waaaaat?"

She tapped her foot. It was somebody who wanted to put siding on her house, she thought. And she was furious. Those calls made her angrier than anything she knew, interrupting whatever she was doing and now killing her lovely mood. Once she told one of the callers that she could not talk because her daughter had just died. And the caller faded away into nothing, leaving Cordelia with the satisfied triumph of winning.

"Cordelia, this is Robert."

Cordelia stared into the receiver.

"Are you there?"

"What are you doing calling here?"

"I have to help Elspeth."

"She's not here. Did you get my letter?" No, he couldn't have gotten it. She only mailed it yesterday. "I wrote you a letter. You'll get it."

"Please be patient, Cordelia."

Cordelia. He had started calling her that just before he left.

"Patient! How can I be patient with someone like you?"

"Will you tell Elspeth to call me? Now here's the num---"

"No. I will not tell her to call you. You stay out of our lives. But send money. Money is all we want from you. You're married and ought not to be talking to Elspeth. Elspeth's refined, knows right from wrong, not like some people."

"Very well. But I need to talk to Elspeth."

"You have a daughter. I wrote you."

Silence. A long silence.

"Are you still there?"

"Yes."

Cordelia could scarcely hear him.

"She doesn't look a thing like you. Or Elspeth."

Silence.

"Are you there?"

"Yes."

"Well, good-bye then. We'll be waiting for the check. Send it to me. We can't worry Elspeth about anything now. She had the baby blues."

"Is she all right?"

"It takes time. Good-bye."

She hung up. That man would never be out of their lives. She wondered what his wife had to say about his calling and writing another woman all the time. She was probably nothing, the wife. For the life of her she could

not see what any woman saw in that man. Trash. Ordinary. Well, she would just wait until the check arrived. If it arrived.

She took up her drink. But instead of soothing her, it made her angrier. And a little fearful. Was she stealing from Elspeth? No. If the man sent anything every penny would go to little Elspeth. She would see to that herself. Besides, she was saving Elspeth the grief and sorrow of being reminded of the man. Every time she saw the check she would grieve.

She sipped again. Mother's protection. That's what she was. A protector. Of her child. And grandchild. Yet it was disturbing always having to be on the front line, the doer in the family, the creator of moods, the maker. It was exhausting, and intellectuals never knew what it was to be practical, to have to scheme sometimes to make things go. Intellectuals lived with their heads in the stars.

Elspeth returned with the baby. Elspeth even carried the baby like an intellectual. She didn't look like other mothers. She looked peculiar with a baby, all wrong somehow. She cradled it with her long arms as if it were an unwanted appendage that would never go away.

"Protect the baby's head, Elspeth. Babies' heads need protecting."

Elspeth stared at Cordelia's drink and said nothing. But she did place her long fingers beneath the baby's head.

"What did the doctor say?" Cordelia was trying to

distract her from looking at the glass.

"He said she would grow out of it."

"But when?"

"In time."

"Lord, Lord." Cordelia sighed wondering if she would ever be able to sleep at night again. "You look tired, Elspeth."

"I am, a little."

Cordelia placed her hand to her throat. Elspeth never complained, never admitted weakness of any sort. The poor girl must be exhausted.

"I think we need someone here," Cordelia said. "Someone to get up with the baby at night. You need rest."

"I'm all right." She was out of the room. Cordelia heard her going upstairs.

Hattie. She would ask Hattie if she didn't want to come over and stay at night. Hattie would probably welcome the invitation. There was a nice cot in the sewing room that was comfortable and she could feed the baby. Elspeth was unable to nurse. She didn't have enough milk. The baby blues had something to do with it, Cordelia was sure of that.

But Hattie said she had a sick aunt-ee at home and was unable to take care of the baby at night. She didn't know anyone who would be able to do that. Cordelia thought of some nice white woman who would be willing to sleep over at night. She advertised in the newspaper:

Wanted:
Nice White Settled Woman to Care for Infant

And she left a post office number the newspaper suggested. She could not have calls all night long. But it was essential to get someone. Elspeth was looking paler and paler. In no way was she a robust young new mother. She was haggard and looked to Cordelia like one of those women she saw downtown carrying dirty babies with rubber nipples in their mouths.

Once Cordelia went into Elspeth's room and on her desk was a tablet and the name "Robert" written over an entire page. The girl was surely grieving. And the baby seemed to bring no release from the grief.

Cordelia lifted the baby high one warm sunny day. "Pretty baby. Pretty baby." She even laughed. But what she was really doing was trying to cheer up Elspeth.

Elspeth merely stared at the two. And Cordelia wondered ^{if} Elspeth ^{were} ~~wasn't~~ having a nervous breakdown. It was only natural to smile and comfort one's new baby.

Cordelia just came right out with it:

"Elspeth, I think you need to see a mind doctor."

Elspeth stared at her. "I was just thinking the reverse was true."

"Me!" Cordelia was astonished. "I've never had an insane thought in my entire life."

Elspeth said nothing and Cordelia did not pursue the idea. Besides, the nice white settled woman Cordelia hired had not turned out very well. She was a country woman,

morally good, but she tended to make Cordelia nervous, also the baby. She talked as if the entire world were deaf. She came at four in the afternoon and left at eight the next morning.

She was a thin woman with piercing hazel eyes whose love of "Jeeezus" beamed fiercely from the eyes. According to her the entire world was going to sin. And she was curious about Elspeth, asking daily where the baby's father was.

"He's away," Cordelia said.

"Hasn't even seen his own baby?"

"Not yet," Cordelia said happily. "He travels in foreign countries. His work takes him abroad."

Belle was the woman's name. Belle Izzard. She had two daughters of her own and was the grandmother of sixteen, but the entire tribe had moved to Texas and Belle Izzard, for the first time in her life, was alone. She liked her job.

Cordelia often spoke to her of loneliness.

"I'm not what you'd call just right down lonely. I have my Jesus."

Which Cordelia thought was a worthy notion. But one she could not truly apply to herself. She really hadn't settled on what she thought of the resurrection yet. But she said nothing of that to the woman. She just went along. Just as she had done all her life. "I just go along," she told people. "Might as well. You do what you have to do."

Elspeth had taken to typing again. It occurred to

Cordelia that little Elspeth would grow up with that sound. Elspeth's ancient typewriter had bells on it which rang constantly, indicating the end of a sentence. Or the end of the world. Who knew?

One morning after Belle departed and Hattie arrived, Cordelia heard the typewriter going, bells and all, and then, suddenly, high laughter. Elspeth had scarcely ever laughed. When something was funny she smiled, a rather secret smile, but never broke out into raucous laughter, as now.

Cordelia could not imagine what was happening. Could Elspeth have written something so funny as to cause such an outburst? Even Hattie stopped dusting.

"What ails Elsbuth?" Hattie asked.

Cordelia said Elspeth must have found something amusing. But then the bells ceased and she heard the crashing of venetian blinds against the floor and the laughing and pictures being smashed and finally the explosion of the typewriter against the wall.

Both Cordelia and Hattie raced up the stairs, Cordelia leading.

When Cordelia opened the door Elspeth, her hair standing out on both sides, was aiming a book toward the door. The room looked like a war zone, glass everywhere, blinds lying limp and torn on the floor, the typewriter half-broken on the floor, bed sheets torn, paper everywhere.

Cordelia could say nothing.

"Humph. Humph," Hattie said. "Don't throw that thang! Lord Jeeeee-zus."

Cordelia ran down the stairs and fumbled through the telephone book. In her panic she could not find Jim Amory's name. She looked under the doctor list in the yellow pages. Finally she reached the office.

A receptionist answered.

Cordelia asked for the doctor. "Immediately," she said.

"He's seeing a patient just now, Mrs. Newman."

"Get him anyway. This is an emergency."

Silence. Panic. Her heart was wild.

"Cordelia, what in the world?" asked Jim Amory.

"It's Elspeth. She's gone crazy, broken up all the furniture. Come."

"I haven't made a house call in fifteen years, Cordelia. Maybe it's just a little temper tantrum. New mothers sometimes---"

"Come right away, Jim. I mean it!" She slammed the phone down. She heard Hattie upstairs:

"Whats got into you, Elsbuth? That isn't no way to act."

Wham.

And Hattie was downstairs in a flash. "I'm goin home. Elsbuth's trying to kill everbody. Hasn't nobody ever thrown no shoe at Hattie. No ma'm."

"Stay right where you are, Hattie," Cordelia said. "I have the doctor coming. It's the baby blues again."

"I never seen nobody with the blues act like she doing," said Hattie.

"Oh, my god," said Cordelia. "My child's lost her mind."

"Sho has," Hattie agreed uncomfortably.

"The baby," Cordelia said. And she raced back upstairs, took the baby from its crib and carried her downstairs. She was afraid Elspeth might kill her child. She had read in newspapers that new mothers had done such. She handed the baby to Hattie. She felt faint.

Finally Jim Amory arrived, sauntering in the house wearing a grey seersucker jacket, the rims of his glasses darker than Cordelia remembered them. He was unduly calm.

"Where's Elspeth?" he drawled, noting Hattie and the baby in her arms.

Cordelia indicated the upstairs and followed him.

"She may throw something at you," Cordelia said.

"Wouldn't be the first time." Oddly he began to whistle.

He knocked on the door. "Elspeth, this is Jim Amory. May I come in?"

Silence.

Jim opened the door and Cordelia peered over his shoulder. Elspeth was sitting on the ripped up bed, her eyes wild, the whites showing and dominating her face.

Jim regarded the room but remained calm as if he were accustomed to such a scene when he visited patients. He placed his black bag on the desk and Cordelia noted the tablet with Robert's name written all over it on the floor.

"Now. What seems to be the trouble here?" Jim asked. Elspeth said nothing but glared at Cordelia.

Jim motioned for Cordelia to leave. He waved her away without looking at her.

Cordelia left, closing the door but she listened from the hall.

"Now Elspeth, I'm going to give you a little shot. You've been through a great deal lately and you need to calm yourself. This often happens with new mothers. So don't be upset."

"Don't let her come back in here."

"Who?" Jim asked casually.

"My mother."

Cordelia put her hand to her breast and doing so felt her heart accelerating at such a speed she could not swallow. What had she done? What possibly could she have done to have her child make such a request?

"You don't want to see yo mother?" Jim asked casually as ever.

"Never. Never again!"

"Why not, Elspeth?"

"She hates my baby."

Jim was silent for a while. "Now," he said, "I think

the shot will make you feel better. I want you to rest. Lie down. Here, put this blanket over you. You're cold, aren't you?"

Elspeth said that she was cold.

"Your mother loves you, Elspeth. You know that."

"She only loves herself."

Cordelia began to weep. She held onto the bannister rail and wept openly, tears falling even to the first floor below.

"We all think your mother is one of the most selfless women in town," Cordelia heard Jim say. And the kindness made the tears rush further. It was true. She was kind. Everyone knew that. She was always thinking of little things to do for people, visiting them when they were sick, sending little presents, entertaining the lonely.

"You don't know her." Elspeth's words did not sound like her voice. Her tongue sounded thick as if she had been drinking whisky.

When Jim came back downstairs he told Cordelia that she must get Elspeth to the hospital.

"How can I do that? You heard her. She doesn't want to see me." The tears welled in her eyes again. "Frankly, Jim, I'm afraid of her. You saw the room. We're just two frail old women here." She gestured toward Hattie and the baby who by now had begun to holler as if she knew somehow that her mother had gone mad. Babies know more than one thinks.

"She's fairly well sedated," Jim shouted over the hollering. "But she needs psychiatric care."

"What do you mean?"

Cordelia took him by the arm and led him out onto the pillared portico. "Just what do you mean?" she said again. "There's nothing like that wrong with Elspeth. Nothing with her mind. She's just got the baby blues."

"Maybe so. That could be it. But I suspect something else--something more serious."

Cordelia's mind went blank. She stared at Jim, his horn-rimmed glasses, standing there as calm as the sunny day telling her these drastic things about her daughter. She seemed to whimper. "You think Elspeth's crazy?"

"Doctors don't use that word, Cordelia. I just think she should get some counseling, some help. Frank ^{Bodenheimer} ~~Webster~~ is one of the finest psychiatrists in Georgia and he's right here in Ashton, two days a week. He looked at his watch. "But first let's get her to the hospital. I'll help you." He glanced at his watch again. He was saying he didn't have time to fool with all this but he would do it anyway. He had an office filled with patients.

"Oh me." Cordelia felt her body slump. "One never stops worrying about one's child. You worry til the grave."

Jim said that "we shouldn't be so pessimistic now. We have pills and therapy now that can help the sick lead a perfectly normal life."

The words were not soothing. Cordelia smoothed her hair.

"Should I go?"

"Maybe not. She seems to have some degree of hostility just now. She'll get over it. Let's let Hattie go with her."

Elspeth did not want to go to the hospital. She said the hospital was purple and she had never liked purple anything.

"They've painted it now," Cordelia heard Hattie lie. "It aint purple now. It's a pretty white."

Finally Elspeth, looking gaunt and weaving, came down the stairs with Jim and Hattie, who was carrying John Henry's old black grip again.

Cordelia stood in the middle of the drawing room, holding the yelling little Elspeth in her arms, patting the child, telling it to "hush now." She needed someone, anyone who could take the baby from her arms, soothe her, take away the worries life had thrown her. One by one. But there was no one.

I shall rise to the occasion, she told herself. There had been other incidents in her life when she told herself that. And it had worked. Determination was her strong point. It had always been so.