



**MARY OLIVIER**  
A LIFE  
**MAY SINCLAIR**

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**KATHA POLLITT**

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MAY SINCLAIR (1863–1946) was the daughter of a rigidly dogmatic Christian woman and a failed shipowner who took to the bottle. She attended Cheltenham Ladies' College, where she began a lifelong study of philosophy, finding in the works of Plato, Spinoza, and Kant a refuge from the religion in which she had been raised. In 1904 her novel *The Divine Fire* was a best seller in America and helped to make her reputation in England, where she became known not only for her own vivid imagistic and psychologically complex fiction but also for championing a range of challenging new writers. She presented Ezra Pound to Ford Madox Ford, encouraged the work of Charlotte Mew, protested the banning of D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, wrote an early appreciation of T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*, and — in a review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* — introduced the term “stream of consciousness” into critical parlance. A member of the Women's Writers Suffrage League, the Aristotelian Society, and the first group to practice Freudian analysis in England, May Sinclair was the author of poems, stories, essays, two works of philosophy, and twenty-four novels, of which *Mary Olivier: A Life* was her favorite.

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**MARY OLIVIER**

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A LIFE

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

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# INTRODUCTION

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*MARY OLIVIER: A LIFE* is that unusual thing in pre-contemporary literature: a bildungsroman centered on a woman's struggle for intellectual achievement, a portrait of the philosopher (and poet and translator of Euripides) as a woman. We meet Mary first as a sensitive, imaginative, rather nervous child who quickly flowers into a brilliantly precocious tomboy, full of curiosity and energy, teaching herself Greek one moment, jumping brooks with her adored older brothers the next. Her conventional, self-absorbed parents have no use for their spirited daughter; her mother, in particular, does her best to squelch her curiosity, independence, and budding sexuality. Yet Mary does not "die at fifteen," as Diderot famously complained was the fate of girls, but becomes ever more intense of herself as she moves from restless, urgent youth to solitary, meditative, strangely ecstatic middle age. The questions that preoccupy her as a young girl — What is the relation of reality to consciousness? Of the individual to others? What would it mean to be free? — stay with her all her life. She is perhaps what Maggie Tulliver might have become, had George Eliot given the heroine of *The Mill on the Floss* the single-mindedness she herself possessed.

It is curious that there were not more versions of Mary's story on the bookshelf when *Mary Olivier* was published, in 1919. (It had been serialized, along with *Ulysses*, in *The Little Review*.) Many women novelists of Sinclair's day and even later shared Mary's frustrations in her quest for education, books, worktime, encouragement, parental approval, connections to the wider world, love. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fiction by women is full of male protagonists who are writers and thinkers. Sinclair herself became famous with such a novel: *The Divine Fire* (1904), the story of Keir Rickman, a poet who refuses to bend to the marketplace, sold 200,000 copies in the United States and numbered President Theodore Roosevelt among its fans. But when women novelists wished to depict a woman dedicated to art, they tended to make her not a writer like themselves but an opera singer or an actress — women like George Eliot's Alcharisi or Willa Cather's Thea Kronberg or Charlotte Brontë's Vashti, who because they abandoned respectability by going on the stage, or never had any to begin with, could move like exotic creatures in an artistic, romantic milieu far from the tea table, the workbasket, and the society of provincial worthies. The struggle of women to escape or transcend or resign themselves to the narrow drawing room of Victorian and Edwardian domesticity was a persistent theme in fiction by women — but not the stories of women who attempted what they themselves achieved. It is as if the authors knew that the marriage plot could not survive a heroine inner-directed and work-absorbed as they knew themselves to be. Would masterful, peremptory, smoldering Mr. Rochester have wanted to marry Charlotte Brontë? Would George Eliot have put up for two minutes with Will Ladislaw, the idealistic but faintly second-rate young politician she inflicted upon the would-be heroic Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, that eight-hundred-page exploration of the pitfalls of grand ambition?

*Mary Olivier*, published when Sinclair was fifty-six, is an autobiographical novel. As Suzanne Raitt details in her excellent critical biography *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford University Press, 2000), Sinclair gave her heroine her birth year, 1863, her real first name, and a family, childhood, and youth much like her own. Sinclair too was the only daughter in a family of boisterous older boys who died young, with a rigidly pious and conventional mother and an emotionally remote father whose alcoholism led to financial ruin and early death. Like Mary, she spent years buried alive in a country village, writing and reading and caring for her aged mother. Mary's passion for German Idealism, her rejection of Christianity, her concern with issues of heredity and biological determinism are all taken

from life — in addition to being a prolific and celebrated novelist, Sinclair was a publisher, philosopher, virtually the only female one of her generation. Mary loves and needs solitude; Sinclair herself was famously shy and elusive (after being seated next to her at a dinner in her honor, Mark Twain thanked her for a “remarkably interesting silence”). Sinclair guarded her privacy ferociously, destroyed many of her private papers, and flits only in passing through the correspondence and diaries of the numerous notable writers of her acquaintance — Virginia Woolf, H. D., Ezra Pound.

It is significant that Sinclair set much of the novel in Yorkshire (her own rural years were spent in Salcombe Regis in Dorset). The cramped village of Morfe (even its name suggests sleep and death, though also transformation), the fiercely devoted female servants and dialect-speaking villagers, Mary’s long walks on the moors, her ability to respond to nature almost as to a person — not to mention her tyrannical father, alcoholic brother, and mad Aunt Charlotte — are all reminiscent of the lives and novels of the Brontë sisters, whom Sinclair deeply admired. In the years preceding *Mary Barton*, she wrote introductions for new editions of their works, a group biography, and a Yorkshire novel, *The Three Sisters*. The Brontë coloring is one of the ways in which Sinclair reinforces the reader’s sense of Mary’s isolation and childlike entrapment in the family. She seems to be living in an earlier era than the other characters: one is surprised when she plays tennis or takes the train — once — to a neighboring town, where people have tea in restaurants and browse in bookshops and where such things as public lectures by distinguished professors apparently take place rather frequently.

How does a woman become an adult in a world that treats her like a child — and not a very valuable child at that? Mary’s mother is jealous of her brains and originality and openly prefers the boys; her father cossets her only to annoy his wife; her brothers are enmeshed in their own doomed struggles for independence. Mary’s brilliance and drive and creativity push her forward intellectually and artistically despite her mother’s attempts to thwart her, but socially and emotionally she remains in swaddling clothes well into adulthood: pulled out of boarding school on a pretext, kept in the dark about everything sexual, deprived of the normal range of experience to such an extent that she fails to realize that kindly, sad, married Mr. Sutcliffe is in love with her until years after he has moved away.

Curiously, given the tremendous importance of marriage to women at the time, little effort is made by anyone in Mary’s family to put her in the way of likely young men: there are no parties, no outings, no musical or literary evenings, no trips. Only once does a brother bring home a friend, the vulgar libertine Lindley Vickers, and the visit is a disaster. It is as if Mary has been raised from the start to remain for life her mother’s companion and shadow — never to grow up and move away or even to take charge at home. But then, thwarted sexuality and perpetual immaturity run in her family. Aunt Lavinia’s brothers forbade her to marry the Unitarian she loved; she and Uncle Edward promised their mother to stay single in order to care for poor Aunt Charlotte — whose madness consists only in the mistaken conviction that men are constantly falling in love with her and that she is about to be married. In this context, Mary’s decision to sleep with the writer Richard Nicholson outside of marriage is not just bold, it is the undoing of a kind of family curse. She will not marry him, even though he is her dreamed-of soul mate, the man whose mind was an “enormous, perfect crystal.” But she is still able to steal pleasure for herself.

Even so, it is hard not to see in Sinclair’s insistence on Mary’s ultimate solitude the conviction that for women the claims of love and creativity are in fundamental opposition. At some moments Sinclair seems to suggest that intellectual passion is defeminizing. “You may care for me as a child cares,” says the worldly freethinker Maurice Jourdain, to whom she is briefly engaged. “You don’t care as a woman does. No woman who cared for a man would write the letters you do. I ask you to tell me about yourself — what you’re feeling and thinking — and you send me some ghastly screed about Spinoza.”

or Kant. Do you suppose any man wants to hear what his sweetheart thinks about Space and Time and the Ding-an-Sich?" But it is also possible to read Sinclair as saying that men cannot live up to women like Mary: unconventional men want conventional wives. Jourdain marries the "dear little girl down in Sussex" who is "clever" — she cooks and sews and keeps her father's house — and is "everything a man wants a woman to be." Even Nicholson, in the end, disappoints, giving up his pursuit of Mary and settling for an old flame for whom he feels no passion.

The theme of love perhaps too punctiliously sacrificed for moral duty runs through fiction by women. George Eliot wrote that Jane Eyre's rejection of Mr. Rochester when she discovers that he is already married was pointless and excessive, since his wife was hopelessly insane. One might say the same of Maggie Tulliver's renunciation of Stephen due to his prior engagement to the sweet but vapid Lucia Deverell, whom he no longer loves or wants to marry — or, to a modern reader's way of thinking, ought not to marry. But surely it is hard to think of a renunciation less necessary than Mary's refusal to marry Nicholson. That she turns him down, not just in order to take care of her increasingly frail and senile mother — for Nicholson would willingly have had Mrs. Olivier to live with the new couple in London — but to take care of her *in Morfe*, is almost too much for a modern reader to bear.

Perhaps it is necessary for the story's internal coherence and serious timbre that Mary remain alone. Hers is not a story that could easily end with wedding bells. And yet one can't help feeling the wheels of the plot creaking a bit, with Sinclair determined to keep her autobiographical heroine as solitary as she herself was, but not quite able to find an adequate motive for Mary's choice — perhaps because the sources of Sinclair's own commitment to solitude lay deeper than she could reach. Could it be that Mary rejects Nicholson less out of duty than because, after so many years of coldness and hostility, her mother's dependence and childlike affection in old age are simply too delicious to set one side? And if so, does that make Mary's oceanic tranquillity at the book's end no mystical breakthrough but a return to childhood, a way of denying to herself that she let pass what would have been the real breakthrough — true and complete communion with another person? The difficulty is that the text invites us to see the end as a kind of fulfillment of what came before, to rejoice with Mary in her self-dissolving trances, which are presented as moments of great beauty and clarity, but the dynamic of the story makes the reader resist this notion of a happy end. Sinclair has all too successfully enlisted us in the cause of Mary's passionate, active self-creation — a self that longs to engage with the world, to love and be loved, and to make her mark as a writer.

Whether or not one is satisfied with its conclusion, *Mary Olivier* remains a remarkably fresh and original achievement. There is nothing dated about its philosophical preoccupations, its evocation of family conflicts, childhood sorrows, and adolescent intensities, the courage and openheartedness of its heroine, the swiftness and poignancy of its language. Sinclair has a rare gift for conveying emotion and drama through small descriptive touches: Richard, welcoming Mary to his London flat, makes her feel "with an air of doing something intensely interesting, an air of security and possession." The mood around Morfe are a "wild country, caught in the net of the stone walls." Suzanne Raitt rightly notes the influence of Imagist poetry on Sinclair's prose. Thus:

Burnt patches. Tongues of heather, twisted and pointed, picked clean by fire, flickering grey over black earth. Towards evening the black and grey ran together like ink and water, stilled into purple, the black purple of grapes.

Perhaps what most gives the novel its distinct, almost magical flavor, though, is that it tells

Victorian story in a modern, and modernist, way. Mary is distinctly a creature of the second half of the nineteenth century, in her preoccupation with the truth of Christianity, her keen and fearful interest in biological determinism, her devotion to work, her prodigious reading, her seriousness, her embeddedness in her family, her acceptance of filial obedience and obligation. Her world — the stable, ceremonious, narrow, secretive, tedious world of upper-middle-class English families — is the one against which dozens of fictional New Women (and thousands of real ones) rebelled. Sinclair renders this familiar nineteenth-century story new by refracting it through a twentieth-century prism. She draws freely on psychoanalysis (Sinclair was a keen proponent of Freud and Jung and helped start the first psychoanalytic clinic in Britain), making use of fugitive early childhood memories, dreamlike and recurrent symbols like Aunt Charlotte's china baby dolls. She replaces Christian orthodoxy with skepticism, out of which is forged a highly personal, improvised mysticism that draws on both East and West. Even the feminism she brings to Mary's story feels modern, despite the dramatic changes in women's lives over the twentieth century, because it is focused not on calling for particular long-achieved, century-old social or political reforms but on the larger and still live issues of women's self-expression and self-determination, on the unwritten gendered rules and expectations that shape family life, courtship, marriage.

Finally, there is the narrative method itself, the stream of consciousness — a term whose first use in a literary context was by Sinclair in a review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*. The opening pages, which evoke Mary's earliest thoughts as a very young child, may remind readers of the celebrated beginning of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but they have a luminous, dreamlike quality — at once funny, poetic, and ominous — that is quite original. Sinclair beautifully conveys, too, the way the deepest questions of life might present themselves to a very intelligent, wondering child:

There was the day you were born, January the twenty-fourth, eighteen sixty-three, at five o'clock in the morning. When you were born you weren't any age at all, not a minute old, not a second, not half a second. But there was eighteen sixty-two and there was January the twenty-third and the minute just before you were born. You couldn't really tell when the twenty-third ended and the twenty-fourth began; because when you counted sixty minutes for the hour and sixty seconds for the minute, there was still the half second and the half of that, and so on for ever and ever.

You couldn't tell when you were really born. And nobody could tell you what being born was.

Lying in bed at night, thinking "about being born and about arithmetic and God," Mary finds her seven-year-old's way to Zeno's Paradox.

Mary's stream of consciousness brings us life as she apprehends it moment by moment. As in the Idealist philosophy she spends so many years studying, consciousness is the only way we can grasp reality. Or is it? In a radiant fusion of form and content, the writing enacts the very questions Mary spends her life trying to answer: Is there a deeper reality behind appearances? How do we know? How do we get to it? Or is it, like a moment of time in Zeno's Paradox, something one approaches but can never attain? For Mary, the answer lies in those revelatory moments of clarity that have visited her in youth and return much later, that are akin to love and to writing poetry, only purer, sharper, more outside the self:

This time it was clear, clear as the black pattern the sycamore makes on the sky.

If it never came again I should remember.



It is a tribute to the power of Sinclair's writing — its almost hallucinatory combination of intensity and fluidity — that one closes the book hoping that Mary has indeed found what she was searching for.

— KATHA POLLIT

MARY OLIVIER

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*A Life*

# BOOK ONE: INFANCY

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*1865–1869*

THE CURTAIN of the big bed hung down beside the cot.

When old Jenny shook it the wooden rings rattled on the pole and grey men with pointed heads and squat, bulging bodies came out of the folds on to the flat green ground. If you looked at them they turned into squab faces smeared with green.

Every night, when Jenny had gone away with the doll and the donkey, you hunched up the blanket and the stiff white counterpane to hide the curtain and you played with the knob in the green painted iron railing of the cot. It stuck out close to your face, winking and grinning at you in a friendly way. You poked it till it left off and turned grey and went back into the railing. Then you had to feel for it with your finger. It fitted the hollow of your hand, cool and hard, with a blunt nose that pushed agreeably into the palm.

In the dark you could go tip-finger along the slender, lashing flourishes of the ironwork. Even stretching your arm out tight you could reach the curlykew at the end. The short, steep flourish took you to the top of the railing and on behind your head.

Tip-fingering backwards that way you got into the grey lane where the prickly stones were and the hedge of little biting trees. When the door in the hedge opened you saw the man in the night-shirt. He had only half a face. From his nose and his cheek-bones downwards his beard hung straight like a dark cloth. You opened your mouth, but before you could scream you were back in the cot; the room was light; the green knob winked and grinned at you from the railing, and behind the curtain Papa and Mamma were lying in the big bed.

One night she came back out of the lane as the door in the hedge was opening. The man stood in the room by the wash-stand, scratching his long thigh. He was turned slantwise from the nightlight on the washstand so that it showed his yellowish skin under the lifted shirt. The white half-face hung by itself on the darkness. When he left off scratching and moved towards the cot she screamed.

Mamma took her into the big bed. She curled up there under the shelter of the raised hip and shoulder. Mamma's face was dry and warm and smelt sweet like Jenny's powderpuff. Mamma's mouth moved over her wet cheeks, nipping her tears.

Her cry changed to a whimper and a soft, ebbing sob.

Mamma's breast: a smooth, cool, round thing that hung to your hands and slipped from them when they tried to hold it. You could feel the little ridges of the stiff nipple as your finger pushed it back into the breast.

Her sobs shook in her throat and ceased suddenly.

## 2.

The big white globes hung in a ring above the dinner table. At first, when she came into the room carried high in Jenny's arms, she could see nothing but the hanging, shining globes. Each had a light inside it that made it shine.

Mamma was sitting at the far end of the table. Her face and neck shone white above the pile of oranges on the dark blue dish. She was dipping her fingers in a dark blue glass bowl.

When Mary saw her she strained towards her, leaning dangerously out of Jenny's arms. Old Jenny said "Tchit-tchit!" and made her arms tight and hard and put her on Papa's knee.

Papa sat up, broad and tall above the table, all by himself. He was dressed in black. One long brown beard hung down in front of him and one short beard covered his mouth. You knew he was smiling because his cheeks swelled high up his face so that his eyes were squeezed into narrow, shining slits. When they came out again you saw scarlet specks and smears in their corners.

Papa's big white hand was on the table, holding a glass filled with some red stuff that was both dark and shining and had a queer, sharp smell.

"Porty-worty winey-piney," said Papa.

The same queer, sharp smell came from between his two beards when he spoke.

Mark was sitting up beside Mamma a long way off. She could see them looking at each other. Roddy and Dank were with them.

They were making flowers out of orange peel and floating them in the finger bowls. Mamma's blue fingers were blue and sharp-pointed in the water behind the dark blue glass of her bowl. The floating orange-peel flowers were blue. She could see Mamma smiling as she stirred them about with the tips of her blue fingers.

Her underlip pouted and shook. She didn't want to sit by herself on Papa's knee. She wanted to sit in Mamma's lap beside Mark. She wanted Mark to make orange-peel flowers for her. She wanted Mamma to look down at her and smile.

Papa was spreading butter on biscuit and powdered sugar on the butter.

"Sugary — Buttery — Bippery," said Papa.

She shook her head. "I want to go to Mamma. I want to go to Mark."

She pushed away the biscuit. "No. No. Mamma give Mary. Mark give Mary."

"Drinky — winky," said Papa.

He put his glass to her shaking mouth. She turned her head away, and he took it between his thumb and finger and turned it back again. Her neck moved stiffly. Her head felt small and brittle under the weight and pinch of the big hand. The smell and the sour, burning taste of the wine made her cry.

"Don't tease Baby, Emilius," said Mamma. "I never tease anybody."

He lifted her up. She could feel her body swell and tighten under the bands and drawstrings of her clothes, as she struggled and choked, straining against the immense clamp of his arms. When his wide red lips pushed out between his beards to kiss her she kicked. Her toes drummed against something stiff and thin that gave way and sprang out again with a cracking and popping sound.

He put her on the floor. She stood there all by herself, crying, till Mark came and took her by the hand.

"Naughty Baby. Naughty Mary," said Mamma. "Don't kiss her, Mark."

"No, Mamma."

He knelt on the floor beside her and smiled into her face and wiped it with his pocket-handkerchief. She put out her mouth and kissed him and stopped crying.

"Jenny must come," Mamma said, "and take Mary away."

"No. Mark take Mary."

"Let the little beast take her," said Papa. "If he does he shan't come back again. Do you hear that, sir?"

Mark said, "Yes, Papa."

They went out of the room hand in hand. He carried her upstairs pickaback. As they went she rested her chin on the nape of his neck where his brown hair thinned off into shiny, golden down.

3.

Old Jenny sat in the rocking-chair by the fireguard in the nursery. She wore a black net cap with purple rosettes above her ears. You could look through the black net and see the top of her head laid out in stripes of grey hair and pinky skin.

She had a grey face, flattened and wide-open like her eyes. She held it tilted slightly backwards out of your way, and seemed to be always staring at something just above your head. Jenny's face had tiny creases and crinkles all over it. When you kissed it you could feel the loose flesh crumpling and sliding softly over the bone. There was always about her a faint smell of sour milk.

No use trying to talk to Jenny. She was too tired to listen. You climbed on to her lap and stroked her face, and said "Poor Jenny. Dear Jenny. Poor Jenny-Wee so tired," and her face shut up and went to sleep. Her broad flat nose drooped; her eyelids drooped; her long, grey bands of hair drooped; she was like the white donkey that lived in the back lane and slept standing on three legs with his ears lying down.

Mary loved old Jenny next to Mamma and Mark; and she loved the white donkey. She wondered why Jenny was always cross when you stroked her grey face and called her "Donkey-Jenny." It was not as if she minded being stroked; because when Mark or Dank did it her face woke up suddenly and smoothed out its creases. And when Roddy climbed up with his long legs into her lap she hugged him tight and rocked him, singing Mamma's song, and called him her baby.

He wasn't. *She* was the baby; and while you were the baby you could sit in people's laps. But old Jenny didn't want her to be the baby.

The nursery had shiny, slippery yellow walls and a brown floor, and a black hearthrug with a centrepiece of brown and yellow flowers. The greyish chintz curtains were spotted with small brown leaves and crimson berries. There were dark-brown cupboards and chests of drawers, and chairs that were brown frames for the yellow network of the cane. Soft bits of you squeezed through the holes and came out on the other side. That hurt and made a red pattern on you where you sat down.

The tall green fireguard was a cage. When Jenny poked the fire you peeped through and saw it fluttering inside. If you sat still you could sometimes hear it say "teck-teck," and sometimes the fire would fly out suddenly with a soft hiss.

High above your head you could just see the gleaming edge of the brass rail.

"Jenny — where's yesterday and where's to-morrow?"

4.

When you had run a thousand hundred times round the table you came to the blue house. It stood behind Jenny's rocking-chair, where Jenny couldn't see it, in a blue garden. The walls and ceiling were blue; the doors and staircases were blue; everything in all the rooms was blue.

Mary ran round and round. She loved the padding of her feet on the floor and the sound of her singing song:

"The pussies are blue, the beds are blue, the matches are blue and the mousetraps and all the little mice and mice!"

Mamma was always there dressed in a blue gown; and Jenny was there, all in blue, with a blue cap; and Mark and Dank and Roddy were there, all in blue. But Papa was not allowed in the blue house.

Mamma came in and looked at her as she ran. She stood in the doorway with her finger on her lips, and she was smiling. Her brown hair was parted in two sleek bands, looped and puffed out.

softly round her ears, and plaited in one plait that stood up on its edge above her forehead. She wore a wide brown silk gown with falling sleeves.

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“Pretty Mamma,” said Mary. “In a blue dress.”

5.

Every morning Mark and Dank and Roddy knocked at Mamma’s door, and if Papa was there he called out, “Go away, you little beasts!” If he was not there she said, “Come in, darlings!” and they climbed up the big bed into Papa’s place and said “Good morning, Mamma!”

When Papa was away the lifted curtain spread like a tent over Mary’s cot, shutting her in with Mamma. When he was there the drawn curtain hung straight down from the head of the bed.

WHITE patterns on the window, sharp spikes, feathers, sprigs with furled edges, stuck flat on to the glass; white webs, crinkled like the skin of boiled milk, stretched across the corner of the pane; crisp sticky stuff that bit your fingers.

Out of doors, black twigs thickened with a white fur; white powder sprinkled over the garden wall. The white, ruffled grass stood out stiffly and gave under your feet with a pleasant crunching. The air smelt good; you opened your mouth and drank it in gulps. It went down like cold, tingling water.

Frost.

You saw the sun for the first time, a red ball that hung by itself on the yellowish white sky. Mamma said, "Yes, of course it would fall if God wasn't there to hold it up in his hands."

Supposing God dropped the sun —

## 2.

The yellowish white sky had come close up to the house, a dirty blanket let down outside the window. The tree made a black pattern on it. Clear glass beads hung in a row from the black branch, each black twig was tipped with a glass bead. When Jenny opened the window there was a queer cold smell like the smell of the black water in the butt.

Thin white powder fluttered out of the blanket and fell. A thick powder. A white fluff that piled itself in a ridge on the window-sill and curved softly in the corner of the sash. It was cold, and melted on your tongue with a taste of window-pane.

In the garden Mark and Dank and Roddy were making the snow man.

Mamma stood at the nursery window with her back to the room. She called to Mary to come and look at the snow man.

Mary was tired of the snow man. She was making a tower with Roddy's bricks while Roddy wasn't there. She had to build it quick before he could come back and take his bricks away, and the quicker you built it the sooner it fell down. Mamma was not to look until it was finished.

"Look — look, Mamma! M-m-mary's m-m-made a tar. And it's *not* falled down!"

The tower reached above Jenny's knee.

"Come and look, Mamma — " But Mamma wouldn't even turn her head.

"I'm looking at the snow man," she said.

Something swelled up, hot and tight, in Mary's body and in her face. She had a big bursting face and a big bursting body. She struck the tower, and it fell down. Her violence made her feel light and small again and happy.

"Where's the tower, Mary?" said Mamma.

"There isn't any tar. I've knocked it down. It was a nashty tar."

## 3.

Aunt Charlotte —

Aunt Charlotte had sent the Isle of Skye terrier to Dank.

There was a picture of Aunt Charlotte in Mamma's Album. She stood on a strip of carpet, supporting



by the hoops of her crinoline; her black lace shawl made a pattern on the light gown. She wore a little hat with a white sweeping feather, and under the hat two long black curls hung down straight on each shoulder.

The other people in the Album were sulky, and wouldn't look at you. The gentlemen made cross faces at somebody who wasn't there; the ladies hung their heads and looked down at their crinoline. Aunt Charlotte hung her head too, but her eyes, tilted up straight under her forehead, pointed at you. And between her stiff black curls she was smiling — smiling. When Mamma came to Aunt Charlotte's picture she tried to turn over the page of the Album quick.

Aunt Charlotte sent things. She sent the fat valentine with the lace paper border and black letters printed on sweet-smelling white satin that Papa threw into the fire, and the white china doll with black hair and blue eyes and no clothes on that Jenny hid in the nursery cupboard.

The Skye terrier brought a message tied under his chin: "Tib. For my dear little nephew Dan with Aunt Charlotte's fond love." He had high-peaked, tufted ears and a blackish grey coat that trailed on the floor like a shawl that was too big for him. When you tried to stroke him the shawl swept and trailed away under the table. You saw nothing but shawl and ears until Papa began to tease Tib. Papa snapped his finger and thumb at him, and Tib showed little angry eyes and white teeth set in a black snarl.

Mamma said, "Please don't do that again, Emilius."

And Papa did it again.

4.

"What are you looking at, Master Daniel?" said Jenny.

"Nothing."

"Then what are you looking like that for? You didn't ought to."

Papa had sent Mark and Dank to the nursery in disgrace. Mark leaned over the back of Jenny's chair and rocked her. His face was red but tight; and as he rocked he smiled because of his punishment.

Dank lay on the floor on his stomach, his shoulders hunched, raised on his elbows, his chin supported by his clenched fists. He was a dark and white boy with dusty eyelashes and rough, dog's hair. He had puckered up his mouth and made it small; under the scowl of his twisted eyebrows he was looking at nothing.

"It's no worse for you than it is for Master Mark," said Jenny.

"Isn't it? Tib was my dog. If he hadn't been my dog Papa wouldn't have teased him, and Mamma wouldn't have sent him back to Aunt Charlotte, and Aunt Charlotte wouldn't have let him be run over."

"Yes. But what did you say to your Papa?"

"I said I wish Tib *had* bitten him. So I do. And Mark said it would have served him jolly well right."

"So it would," said Mark.

Roddy had turned his back on them. Nobody was taking any notice of him; so he sang aloud himself the song he was forbidden to sing:

"John Brown's body lies a-rotting in his grave,  
John Brown's body lies a-rotting in his grave — "

The song seemed to burst out of Roddy's beautiful white face; his pink lips twirled and tilted; his golden curls bobbed and nodded to the tune.

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"John Brown's body lies a-rotting in his grave,  
As we go marching on!"

"When I grow up," said Dank, "I'll kill Papa for killing Tibby. I'll bore holes in his face with Mark's gimlet. I'll cut pieces out of him. I'll get the matches and set fire to his beard. I'll — I'll *hu* him."

"I don't think *I* shall," said Mark. "But if I do I shan't kick up a silly row about it first."

"It's all very well for you. You'd kick up a row if Tibby was your dog."

Mary had forgotten Tibby. Now she remembered.

"Where's Tibby? I want him."

"Tibby's dead," said Jenny.

"What's 'dead'?"

"Never you mind."

Roddy was singing:

"And *from* his nose and *to* his chin  
The worms crawled out and the worms crawled in —

"*That's* dead," said Roddy.

## 5.

You never knew when Aunt Charlotte mightn't send something. She forgot your birthday and sometimes Christmas; but, to make up for that, she remembered in between. Every time she was going to be married she remembered.

Sarah the cat came too long after Mark's twelfth birthday to be his birthday present. There was no message with her except that Aunt Charlotte was going to be married and didn't want her any more. Whenever Aunt Charlotte was going to be married she sent you something she didn't want.

Sarah was a white cat with a pink nose and pink lips and pink pads under her paws. Her tabby hood came down in a peak between her green eyes. Her tabby cape went on along the back of her tail, tapering to the tip. Sarah crouched against the fireguard, her haunches raised, her head sunk back over her shoulders, and her paws tucked in under her white, pouting breast.

Mark stooped over her; his mouth smiled its small, firm smile; his eyes shone as he stroked her. Sarah raised her haunches under the caressing hand.

Mary's body was still. Something stirred and tightened in it when she looked at Sarah.

"I want Sarah," she said.

"You can't have her," said Jenny. "She's Master Mark's cat." She wanted her more than Roddy's bricks and Dank's animal book or Mark's soldiers. She trembled when she held her in her arms and kissed her and smelt the warm, sweet, sleepy smell that came from the top of her head.

"Little girls can't have everything they want," said Jenny.

"I wanted her before you did," said Dank. "You're too little to have a cat at all."

He sat on the table swinging his legs. His dark, mournful eyes watched Mark under their dog's

scowl. He looked like Tibby, the terrier that Mamma sent away because Papa teased him.

“Sarah isn’t your cat either, Master Daniel. Your Aunt Charlotte gave her to your Mamma, and your Mamma gave her to Master Mark.”

“She ought to have given her to me. She took my dog away.”

“I gave her to you,” said Mark.

“And I gave her to you back again.”

“Well then, she’s half our cat.”

“I want her,” said Mary. She said it again and again.

Mamma came and took her into the room with the big bed.

The gas blazed in the white globes. Lovely white lights washed like water over the polished yellow furniture: the bed, the great high wardrobe, the chests of drawers, the twisted poles of the looking-glass. There were soft rounds and edges of blond light on the white marble chimney-piece and the white marble washstand. The drawn curtains were covered with shining silver patterns on a sapphire green ground that shone. All these things showed again in the long, flashing mirrors.

Mary looked round the room and wondered why the squat grey men had gone out of the curtains.

“Don’t look about you,” said Mamma. “Look at me. Why do you want Sarah?”

She had forgotten Sarah.

“Because,” she said, “Sarah is so sweet.”

“Mamma gave Sarah to Mark. Mary mustn’t want what isn’t given her. Mark doesn’t say, ‘I want Mary’s dollies.’ Papa doesn’t say, ‘I want Mamma’s workbox.’ ”

“But *I* want Sarah.”

“And that’s selfish and self-willed.”

Mamma sat down on the low chair at the foot of the bed.

“God,” she said, “hates selfishness and self-will. God is grieved every time Mary is self-willed and selfish. He wants her to give up her will.”

When Mamma talked about God she took you on her lap and you played with the gold tassel on her watch chain. Her face was solemn and tender. She spoke softly. She was afraid that God might hear her talking about him and wouldn’t like it.

Mary knelt in Mamma’s lap and said “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” and “Our Father,” and played with the gold tassel. Every day began and ended with “Our Father” and “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.”

“What’s hallowed?”

“Holy,” said Mamma. “What God is. Sacred and holy.”

Mary twisted the gold tassel and made it dance and run through the loop of the chain. Mamma took it out of her hands and pressed them together and stooped her head to them and kissed them. She could feel the kiss tingling through her body from her finger-tips, and she was suddenly docile and appeased.

When she lay in her cot behind the curtain she prayed: “Please God keep me from wanting Sarah.”

In the morning she remembered. When she looked at Sarah she thought: “Sarah is Mark’s cat and Dank’s cat.”

She touched her with the tips of her fingers. Sarah’s eyes were reproachful and unhappy. She ran away and crept under the chest of drawers.

“Mamma gave Sarah to Mark.”

Mamma was sacred and holy. Mark was sacred and holy. Sarah was sacred and holy, crouching under the chest of drawers with her eyes gleaming in the darkness.

6.

It was a good and happy day.

She lay on the big bed. Her head rested on Mamma's arm. Mamma's face was close to her. Water trickled into her eyes out of the wet pad of pocket-handkerchief. Under the cold pad a hot, grinding pain came from the hole in her forehead. Jenny stood beside the bed. Her face had waked up and she was busy squeezing something out of a red sponge into a basin of pink water.

When Mamma pressed the pocket-handkerchief tight the pain ground harder, when she loosened blood ran out of the hole and the pocket-handkerchief was warm again. Then Jenny put on the sponge

She could hear Jenny say, "It was the Master's fault. She didn't ought to have been left in the room with him."

She remembered. The dining-room and the sharp spike on the fender and Papa's legs stretched out. He had told her not to run so fast and she had run faster and faster. It wasn't Papa's fault.

She remembered tripping over Papa's legs. Then falling on the spike. Then nothing.

Then waking in Mamma's room.

She wasn't crying. The pain made her feel good and happy; and Mamma was calling her her darling and her little lamb. Mamma loved her. Jenny loved her.

Mark and Dank and Roddy came in. Mark carried Sarah in his arms. They stood by the bed and looked at her; their faces pressed close. Roddy had been crying; but Mark and Dank were excited. They climbed on to the bed and kissed her. They made Sarah crouch down close beside her and held her there. They spoke very fast, one after the other.

"We've brought you Sarah."

"We've given you Sarah."

"She's your cat."

"To keep for ever."

She was glad that she had tripped over Papa's legs. It was a good and happy day.

7.

The sun shone. The polished green blades of the grass glittered. The gravel walk and the nasturtium bed together made a broad orange blaze. Specks like glass sparkled in the hot grey earth. On the green flagstone the red poppy you picked yesterday was a black thread, a purple stain.

She was happy sitting on the grass, drawing the fine, sharp blades between her fingers, sniffing the smell of the mignonette that tingled like sweet pepper, opening and shutting the yellow mouths of the snap-dragon.

The garden flowers stood still, straight up in the grey earth. They were as tall as you were. You could look at them a long time without being tired.

The garden flowers were not like the animals. The cat Sarah bumped her sleek head under your chin; you could feel her purr throbbing under her ribs and crackling in her throat. The white rabbit pushed out his nose to you and drew it in again, quivering, and breathed his sweet breath into your mouth.

The garden flowers wouldn't let you love them. They stood still in their beauty, quiet, arrogant, reproachful. They put you in the wrong. When you stroked them they shook and swayed from you. When you held them tight their heads dropped, their backs broke, they shrivelled up in your hands. All the flowers in the garden were Mamma's; they were sacred and holy.

You loved best the flowers that you stooped down to look at and the flowers that were not Mamma's: the small crumpled poppy by the edge of the field, and the ears of the wild rye that ran up your sleeve and tickled you, and the speed-well, striped like the blue eyes of Meta, the wax doll.

When you smelt mignonette you thought of Mamma.

It was her birthday. Mark had given her a little sumach tree in a red pot. They took it out of the pot and dug a hole by the front door steps outside the pantry window and planted it there.

Papa came out on to the steps and watched them.

"I suppose," he said, "you think it'll *grow*?"

Mamma never turned to look at him. She smiled because it was her birthday. She said, "Of course it'll grow."

She spread out its roots and pressed it down and padded up the earth about it with her hands. It held out its tiny branches, stiffly, like a toy tree, standing no higher than the mignonette. Papa looked at Mamma and Mark, busy and happy with their heads together, taking no notice of him. He laughed at the length of his big beard and went back into the house suddenly and slammed the door. You knew that he disliked the sumach tree and that he was angry with Mark for giving it to Mamma.

When you smelt mignonette you thought of Mamma and Mark and the sumach tree, and Papa standing on the steps, and the queer laugh that came out of his beard.

When it rained you were naughty and unhappy because you couldn't go out of doors. Then Mamma stood at the window and looked into the front garden. She smiled at the rain. She said, "It will be good for my sumach tree."

Every day you went out on to the steps to see if the sumach tree had grown.

8.

The white lamb stood on the table beside her cot.

Mamma put it there every night so that she could see it first thing in the morning when she woke.

She had had a birthday. Suddenly in the middle of the night she was five years old.

She had kept on waking up with the excitement of it. Then, in the dark twilight of the room, she had seen a bulky thing inside the cot, leaning up against the rail. It stuck out queerly and its weight dragged the counterpane tight over her feet.

The birthday present. What she saw was not its real shape. When she poked it, stiff paper bent and crackled; and she could feel something big and solid underneath. She lay quiet and happy, trying to guess what it could be, and fell asleep again.

It was the white lamb. It stood on a green stand. It smelt of dried hay and gum and paint like the other toy animals, but its white coat had a dull, woolly smell, and that was the real smell of the lamb. Its large, slanting eyes stared off over its ears into the far corners of the room, so that it never looked at you. This made her feel sometimes that the lamb didn't love her, and sometimes that it was frightened and wanted to be comforted.

She trembled when first she stroked it and held it to her face, and sniffed its lamby smell.

Papa looked down at her. He was smiling; and when she looked up at him she was not afraid. She had the same feeling that came sometimes when she sat in Mamma's lap and Mamma talked about God and Jesus. Papa was sacred and holy.

He had given her the lamb.

It was the end of her birthday; Mamma and Jenny were putting her to bed. She felt weak and tired and sad because it was all over.

“Come to that,” said Jenny, “your birthday was over at five minutes past twelve this morning.”

“When will it come again?”

“Not for a whole year,” said Mamma.

“I wish it would come to-morrow.”

Mamma shook her head at her. “You want to be spoiled and petted every day.”

“No. No. I want — I want — ”

“She doesn’t know what she wants,” said Jenny.

“Yes. I do. I *do*.”

“Well — ”

“I want to love Papa every day. ’Cause he gave me my lamb.”

“Oh,” said Mamma, “if you only love people because they give you birthday presents — ”

“But I don’t — I don’t — really and truly — ”

“You didn’t ought to have no more birthdays,” said Jenny, “if they make you cry.”

Why couldn’t they see that crying meant that she wanted Papa to be sacred and holy every day?

The day after the birthday when Papa went about the same as ever, looking big and frightening when he “Baa’d” into her face and called out, “Mary had a little lamb!” and “Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” she looked after him sorrowfully and thought: “Papa gave me my lamb.”

## 9.

One day Uncle Edward and Aunt Bella came over from Chadwell Grange. They were talking to Mamma a long time in the drawing-room, and when she came in they stopped and whispered.

Roddy told her the secret. Uncle Edward was going to give her a live lamb.

Mark and Dank said it couldn’t be true. Uncle Edward was not a real uncle; he was only Aunt Bella’s husband, and he never gave you anything. And anyhow the lamb wasn’t born yet and couldn’t come for weeks and weeks.

Every morning she asked, “Has my new lamb come? When is it coming? Do you think it will come to-day?”

She could keep on sitting still quite a long time by merely thinking about the new lamb. It would run beside her when she played in the garden. It would eat grass out of her hand. She would tie a ribbon round its neck and lead it up and down the lane. At these moments she forgot the toy lamb. It stood on the chest of drawers in the nursery, looking off into the corners of the room, neglected.

By the time Uncle Edward and Aunt Bella sent for her to come and see the lamb, she knew exactly what it would be like and what would happen. She saw it looking like the lambs in the Bible Picture Book, fat, and covered with thick, pure white wool. She saw Uncle Edward, with his yellow face and big nose and black whiskers, coming to her across the lawn at Chadwell Grange, carrying the lamb over his shoulder like Jesus.

It was a cold morning. They drove a long time in Uncle Edward’s carriage, over the hard, lumpy roads, between fields white with frost, and Uncle Edward was not on his lawn.

Aunt Bella stood in the big hall, waiting for them. She looked much larger and more important than Mamma.

“Aunt Bella, have you got my new lamb?”

She tried not to shriek it out, because Aunt Bella was nearly always poorly, and Mamma told her that if you shrieked at her she would be ill.

Mamma said “Sh-sh-sh!” And Aunt Bella whispered something and she heard Mamma answer

“Better not.”

“If she *sees* it,” said Aunt Bella, “she’ll understand.”

Mamma shook her head at Aunt Bella.

“Edward would like it,” said Aunt Bella. “He wanted to give it her himself. It’s *his* present.”

Mamma took her hand and they followed Aunt Bella through the servants’ hall into the kitchen. The servants were all there, Rose and Annie and Cook, and Mrs. Fisher, the housekeeper, and Giles, the young footman. They all stared at her in a queer, kind way as she came in.

A low screen was drawn close round one corner of the fireplace; Uncle Edward and Pidgeon, the bailiff, were doing something to it with a yellow horse-cloth.

Uncle Edward came to her, looking down the side of his big nose. He led her to the screen and drew it away.

Something lay on the floor wrapped in a piece of dirty blanket. When Uncle Edward pushed back the blanket a bad smell came out. He said, “Here’s your lamb, Mary. You’re just in time.”

She saw a brownish grey animal with a queer, hammer-shaped head and long black legs. Its body was drawn out and knotted like an enormous maggot. It lay twisted to one side and its eyes were shut.

“That isn’t my lamb.”

“It’s the lamb I always said Miss Mary was to have, isn’t it, Pidgeon?”

“Yes, Squoire, it’s the lamb you bid me set aside for little Missy.”

“Then,” said Mary, “why does it look like that?”

“It’s very ill,” Mamma said gently. “Poor Uncle Edward thought you’d like to see it before it died. You *are* glad you’ve seen it, aren’t you?”

“No.”

Just then the lamb stirred in its blanket; it opened its eyes and looked at her.

She thought: “It’s my lamb. It looked at me. It’s *my* lamb and it’s dying. My *lamb*’s dying.”

The bad smell came again out of the blanket. She tried not to think of it. She wanted to sit down on the floor beside the lamb and lift it out of its blanket and nurse it; but Mamma wouldn’t let her.

When she got home Mamma took down the toy lamb from the chest of drawers and brought it to her.

She sat quiet a long time holding it in her lap and stroking it.

The stiff eyes of the toy lamb stared away over its ears.

JENNY was cross and tugged at your hair when she dressed you to go to Chadwell Grange.

“Jenny-Wee, Mamma says if I’m not good Aunt Bella will be ill. Do you think it’s really true?”

Jenny tugged. “I’d thank you for some of your Aunt Bella’s illness,” she said.

“I mean,” Mary said, “like Papa was in the night. Every time I get ’cited and jump about I think she’ll open her mouth and begin.”

“Well, if she was to you’d oughter be sorry for her.”

“I *am* sorry for her. But I’m frightened too.”

“That’s not being good,” said Jenny. But she left off tugging.

Somehow you knew she was pleased to think you were not really good at Aunt Bella’s, where Mrs. Fisher dressed and undressed you and you were allowed to talk to Pidgeon.

Roddy and Dank said you ought to hate Uncle Edward and Pidgeon and Mrs. Fisher, and not to like Aunt Bella very much, even if she was Mamma’s sister. Mamma didn’t really like Uncle Edward; she only pretended because of Aunt Bella.

Uncle Edward had an ugly nose and a yellow face widened by his black whiskers; his mouth stretched from one whisker to the other, and his black hair curled in large tufts above his ears. But he had no beard; you could see the whole of his mouth at once; and when Aunt Bella came into the room his little blue eyes looked up off the side of his nose and he smiled at her between his tufts of hair. It was dreadful to think that Mark and Dank and Roddy didn’t like him. It might hurt him so much that he would never be happy again.

About Pidgeon she was not quite sure. Pidgeon was very ugly. He had long stiff legs, and a long stiff face finished off with a fringe of red whiskers that went on under his chin. Still, it was not nice to think of Pigeon being unhappy either. But Mrs. Fisher was large and rather like Aunt Bella, only softer and more bulging. Her round face had a high red polish on it always, and when she saw you coming her eyes twinkled, and her red forehead and her big cheeks and her mouth smiled all together a faint, simmering smile. When you got to the black and white marble tiles you saw her waiting for you at the foot of the stairs.

She wanted to ask Mrs. Fisher if it was true that Aunt Bella would be ill if she were naughty; but when squeezing and dragging came under her waist whenever she thought about it, and that made her shiver and ashamed. It went when they left her to play by herself on the lawn in front of the house.

Aunt Bella’s house was enormous. Two long rows of windows stared out at you, their dark green storm shutters folded back on the yellow brick walls. A third row of little squeezed-up windows and little squeezed-up shutters blinked in the narrow space under the roof. All summer a sweet smell came from that side of the house where cream-coloured roses hung on the yellow walls between the green shutters. There was a cedar tree on the lawn and a sun-dial and a stone fountain. Goldfish swam in the clear greenish water. The flowers in the round beds were stiff and shining, as if they had been cut out of tin and freshly painted. When you thought of Aunt Bella’s garden you saw calceolarias, brown velvet purses with yellow spots.

She could always get away from Aunt Bella by going down the dark walk between the yew hedge and the window of Mrs. Fisher’s room, and through the stable-yard into the plantation. The cocks and hens had their black timber house there in the clearing, and Ponto, the Newfoundland, lived all by himself in his kennel under the little ragged fir trees.



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