

## X

". . . so I thought I should tell you," Tommy said into the phone. His hand would shake but his voice was as steady as if he were discussing someone else's mother. He was made of iron. He surprised even himself. His mind worked as it had all the terrible night, at top speed, coolly and efficiently, going to the heart of the matter. Yet he'd been ready for this particular catastrophe for a long time. He had figured out ahead of time just what he should do and how he should do it. The call to Bill was just part of the plan.

His mother had cared for Bill so Bill had a right to be told.

Bill too was calm, so calm that Tommy was surprised when he concluded the conversation by saying, "I'll be

over there in about half an hour."

"But it's six o'clock in the morning," Tommy protested.

"It doesn't matter," said Bill. "I'll see you in a little while." And he hung up.

Tommy put down the phone. Did Bill think they couldn't stay alone? They could. He could take care of them.

Dr. Brown hadn't liked their staying alone. But it was clear they couldn't stay at the hospital much longer. The people at the hospital hadn't liked them to be there either. And when Tommy heard the bad news -- for it couldn't be anything else -- he didn't want to be in that hospital waiting room with its orange furniture and empty coffee cups with cigarette butts in them. He'd brought Emma along, not knowing what else to do with her, and she was terrified. Oh, she was being very good. She sat where he told her to and didn't move or speak but she was too little for this.

Dr. Brown said Mother was in surgery. That must be bad, Tommy thought, because the doctor had taken him off in a corner to tell him so that Emma wouldn't hear -- though she was asleep by that time. Then Dr. Brown said he'd take them back to his house, his wife would look after them. But they hardly knew Dr. Brown, had never even seen his wife. They only went to him because Dr. Johnson

had gone off to the war. Tommy said no, they would go home, they would call their uncle, they would be all right.

Dr. Brown didn't like that but there wasn't much he could do about it so he'd driven them home and left them there. Of course Tommy had no intention of letting Bill stay with them but there didn't seem to be any way of preventing him from coming over if he wanted to, even at six in the morning.

Well, she'd die, thought Tommy. Hadn't he always known that? That was what life did to you. That's what happened in books -- books like War and Peace and Tale of Two Cities, real books, not the books you were supposed to read when you were a child, with happy endings and everything coming out all right. Life was not like that. Life was not like The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew.

The baby had died. Tommy hadn't been that excited about the baby. Babies were useless till they got to be old enough to talk to -- say eight, maybe. But still he felt bad about the baby, real bad. At eight the baby might have been somebody interesting just as there were certain indications (but only small ones) that Emma might someday stop being a pain in the neck. She was beginning to show some interest in trains (though of course she could be faking that). But it wasn't just the fact that someday

the baby might have been old enough to play chess with you. It was that now they would never know. The baby would never have a chance to learn chess or not to learn chess.

It was not as if the baby had never been thought of at all. This baby had been thought of, he had been alive in all their imaginations. (His name was Edward and he wore blue corduroy overalls and fell over his own feet and spilled mushed up bananas on his high chair and made unintelligible sounds that might or might not be words.) This Edward, who might or might not have learned how to play chess, had been cancelled. It was sad, it was very sad, but it didn't come anywhere near the sadness of Mother dying. Edward never getting to decide if he wanted to learn chess or not was sad like it was sad that Tommy would never see a passenger pigeon. It was something he was missing but it was not like losing something he already had.

"The saddest words of tongue and pen. . ." said Tommy to himself but he was too depressed to say the rest.

He was hungry and that was why he felt so bad all of a sudden. He'd gotten Emma to go to bed. She was really too tired and confused -- almost in a state of shock -- to understand what was going on. He had taken her up to her room, made her put on the old nightgown, and pushed

her into bed. She hadn't cried at all. Then he turned on the pink horses although in the morning light they hardly showed. Still it was good to keep things as normal as possible. And while he was doing all this, he felt a sort of astonishment that he knew how to do these things. Yet he had helped take care of Emma when she was a baby. She'd been sort of cute in the beginning, before she got to be so bratty. When she was little she'd reach out to him with her fat little hands and laugh whenever he came near.

Now she slept and he was hungry.

He wanted a soft-boiled egg and a piece of toast. That was easy enough. He'd seen his mother do that hundreds of times. He took an egg out of the refrigerator, filled a small saucepan with water, put the egg in it, set it on the burner. How long? Wasn't there such a thing as the three-minute egg? Yes. He dropped a piece of bread in the toaster and turned the flame on under the saucepan. He counted the seconds -- "One chimpanzee, two chimpanzee, three chimpanzee . . ." and when he got to "one hundred and eighty chimpanzee" he turned the gas off, retrieved the toast from the toaster, and took the toast and the egg into the dining room. His stomach hurt. It would feel better once he got some food into it.

But the egg, broken into, was raw. It lay there in the

bowl, clear and slimy and uncooked.

He was going to be sick. He leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath and then another. No, he was better. But there lay the egg, uncooked -- neither chicken nor food. He thought, "I can't even cook." He nibbled at the toast but it was dry and cold and again for a moment he thought he would be sick.

He supposed that his father would soon be dead. He would be shot up on the coast of France when the invasion came. Sometimes he woke in the middle of the night, knowing that, knowing it so surely he could almost read the telegram from the War Department, black bordered (was it really true that they were black bordered? you couldn't find out because you couldn't ask anybody who had gotten one), "We regret to inform you . . ." And now his mother was dying too. He would be an orphan, he and Emma both.

He pondered that. "I don't know where they keep their money or how to find out," he thought, "or if there's a law against our living here without either of them. Emma will forget them but I am too old. And Mother -- " but he was going to be sick. No, he wasn't --if he would only take a deep breath and another. Last night his mother had made a jellyroll for dessert because she knew how much he liked

it, and it didn't use any shortening, but he'd refused to have a second helping because Bill was there. And his mother had said, "Oh, come on," and he'd shouted, "No, I don't want any." It wasn't her fault. Nor Bill's either. Bill just came over too much because he didn't realize they didn't want him there that often. His mother had said, "I made it just for you, Tommy." She had too. Emma didn't like it. Emma ate the jelly part but left the rest. And now that he wasn't fat anymore he could have had a second helping if he'd wanted to. But he wouldn't, and her feelings were hurt.

Still she would never call him "Tom." "Tommy" was such a baby name. She treated him all the time like he was Emma's age.

He was hungry again. It was thinking of the jellyroll that did it. But the three-minute egg stared up at him, raw and awful looking. There was a tiny spot of blood in the yolk. That was the tiny baby chicken, just a drop of blood like Edward had been to start with and now neither Edward nor the chicken would ever be anything.

In his father's desk was a checkbook and that was his parents' money. Yet Tommy couldn't sign one of those checks. He couldn't sign them, as his mother did, with the gold fountain pen which no one but his mother was allowed to use

(not even his father), and blot the wet ink with the piece of cardboard that had green felt on one side for blotting and on the other the name and address of the bank. If they were orphans, could they have their parents' money or would they have to depend on relatives? But all the uncles had gone to war. The grandparents were too far away and besides they were too old to want to take on two children. But Emma and he could not survive on raw eggs and cold toast.

"Water, water, everywhere,/ And all the boards did shrink;/ Water, water, everywhere,/ And not a drop to drink." That was a quote he'd learned specially to say at Avalon, when they walked on the beach and Emma got thirsty. But it fit perfectly well here. (He must be feeling better now, he thought, if he could quote.)

And once they had eaten (raw or otherwise) all the food that was in the refrigerator, they had no money to buy more. All the money was in those rectangles of pink paper that had to be signed by his mother or his father, unless there was a will. Tommy did not know if there was a will or not. People his parents' age did not usually make wills. Wills were for old people or people with lots of money and even they did not always do it, and then all the relatives fought. The relatives always fought even if they didn't need the



money and if they all loved each other. That was human nature, relatives fighting.

But if there was no will, did the money automatically go to the children? "Oh," thought Tommy, "if I only knew the law." But he didn't even know how to find it out. He couldn't look it up in the Lincoln Library of Essential Information like he could the capital of Wisconsin or the natural resources of India. But surely somewhere in some large book, dusty with age and importance, perhaps too heavy to lift, lay the answers. Perhaps there was a chapter called "Wills" and you could look in the table of contents to find out whether you and your little sister, being minors, were going to starve to death while your parents' money lay moldering in the bank, no good to anybody.

He conjured up the page in outline form (they had been doing outlines in school). It went something like this.

I. Money

A. Dying with wills

B. Dying without wills

1. Adults: Money to be divided evenly among adult children.
2. Children: the money shall not be given to minor children but must be given to the parents of the dead people or to their brothers and sisters.

Of course their grandparents would not let them starve to death but that was not the same thing as having the money themselves.

The egg just lay there. When his mother cooked him an egg for breakfast she broke it open with a quick tap of the knife right at the equator of the egg. Then she put the egg in a little blue bowl around the edge of which a dog chased a cat (or perhaps the cat chased the dog). And Tommy ate the egg and a piece of warm toast into which the spread butter (but it was only margarine because of the war) had melted. But Tommy could not even boil an egg.

Still he marvelled at how strong he was. These problems -- none of them were insoluble. He could manage them as they came. That was what happened when you used your head. The strength unfolded as you needed it.

There was a knock at the door.

Tommy went to the front door and opened it.

It was Bill -- Bill looking worried, Bill come to take care of him, take care of him and Emma, but (thought Tommy) what difference did it make who took care of them if Mother died?

## XI

Oh, God, I feel the same way, thought Bill at the sight of Tommy's face. Why don't you go ahead and cry, he thought. God knows I wish I could. But instead they solemnly shook hands.