They Came Like Swallows

by

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They came like swallows and like swallows went,
And yet a woman's powerful character
Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
And half a dozen in formation there,
That seemed to whirl upon a compass-point,
Found certainty upon the dreaming air . . .

W. B. Yeats

BOOK ONE

WHOSE ANGEL CHILD

I

BUNNY did not waken all at once. A sound (what, he did not know) struck the surface of his sleep and sank like a stone. His dream subsided, leaving him awake, stranded, on his bed. He turned helplessly and confronted the ceiling. A pipe had burst during the winter before, and now there was the outline of a yellow lake. The lake became a bird with a plumed head and straggling tail feathers, while

Bunny was looking at it. When there were no further changes, his eyes wandered down by way of the blue-and-white wallpaper to the other bed, where Robert lay sleeping. They lingered for a moment upon Robert's parted lips, upon his face drained and empty with sleep.

It was raining.

Outside, branches of the linden rose and fell in the wind, rose and fell. And November leaves came down. Bunny turned over upon the small unyielding body of Araminta Culpepper. Because he was eight, and somewhat past the age when boys are supposed to play with dolls, Araminta hung from the bedpost by day—an Indian papoose with an unbreakable expression on her face. But at night she shared his bed with him. A dozen times he drew her to him lovingly in sleep. And if he woke too soon, the darkness was neither frightful nor bare so long as he could put out his hand and touch her.

Before him—before Peter Morison who was called Bunny—was the whole of the second Sunday in November, 1918. He moved slightly in order that Araminta Culpepper might have room for her head on the pillow. If it had been a clear day, if

the sky were blue and full of sunlight, he would have to go off to Sunday school and sing hymns and perhaps hear the same old story about Daniel who was put in the lions' den, or about Elisha, or about Elijah who went to heaven in a chariot of fire. And what would become of his morning? As soon as he got home and spread the funny-paper out on the floor where he could look at it comfortably, some one would be sure to come along and exclaim over him: *For Heaven's sake, it's too nice a day to be in the house. Why don't you go outdoors and get some exercise?* And if he pretended that he was going to but didn't, they would come again in a little while. He would have to put on his cap and his woolly coat and mittens, whether he wanted to or not. He would be driven out of the house to roll disconsolately in a bed of leaves or to wander through the garden where nothing bloomed; where there were only sticks and crisp grass and the stalks of summer flowers.

But not now, Bunny said to himself, hearing the sound of water dripping, dropping from the roof. Not this morning. And somewhere in the front part of the house a door opened so that his mother's voice came up the stairs. A spring inside him,

a coiled spring, was set free. He sat up and threw his covers to the foot of the bed. When he was washed and dressed he went downstairs. His mother was sitting at the breakfast table before the fire in the library.

"How do you do?" He threw his arms about her and planted a kiss somewhat wildly on her mouth. "How do you do and how do you do again?"

"I do very well, thank you."

She held him off in front of her to see whether he had washed thoroughly, and Bunny noticed with relief the crumbs at his father's place, the carelessly folded napkin.

"Did you have a good night? Is Robert up?"

Bunny shook his head.

"Stirring?"

"No."

"I thought that would happen."

While Bunny settled himself at the table she buttered a piece of toast for him. He was old enough to butter his own but she liked doing it for him. She was that way. When she had finished she lifted the platter of bacon from the hearth.

"Robert stayed up until ten o'clock, trying to finish *The Boy Allies in Bulgaria.* I told him they

wouldn't assassinate anybody without him, but he wanted to finish it just the same." She helped herself to another cup of coffee. "You know how he is."

Robert was thirteen and very trying. More so, it seemed to Bunny, than most people. He wouldn't go to bed and he wouldn't get up. He hated to bathe or be kissed or practise his music lesson. He left the light burning in the basement. He refused to eat oysters or squash. He wouldn't get up on cold mornings and close the window. He spread his soldiers all over the carpet in the living-room and when it came time to pick them up he was never there; he had gone off to help somebody dig a cave. And likely as not he would come home late for dinner, his clothes covered with mud, his knuckles skinned, his hair full of leaves and sticks, and a hole in his brand-new sweater.

There was no time (no time that Bunny could remember) when Robert had not made him cry at least once between morning and night. Robert hid Bunny's thrift stamps and his ball of lead foil. Or he danced through the house swinging Araminta Culpepper by the braids. Or he twisted Bunny's arm and showed him a fine new trick, the

point of which was that he got his thumbs bent out of shape. Or he might do no more than sit across the room saying, *Creepy-creepy-creepy . . .* pointing his finger at Bunny and describing smaller and smaller circles until the tears would not stay back any longer.

Before this day was over, it too would be spoiled like all the others. But while Robert was still upstairs in bed there was nothing for Bunny to worry about, no reason on earth why he should not enjoy his breakfast.

"It's raining," he said, and helped himself to bacon.

"I see it is." His mother took the plate from him and put it back on the hearth to keep warm for Robert. "It's been raining since five o'clock."

Bunny looked out of the window hopefully.

"Hard?"

Sometimes when it rained heavily for a considerable time he was not expected to go outside even though it cleared up afterward. The ground was too wet, they said. He might catch his death.

"Hard, Muv?"

"Like this."

Bunny tried to persuade himself that it was a

heavy rain, but there was too much wind and not enough water. All the whirling and criss-crossing, the beating against the window and sliding in sudden rivulets down the glass—there was very little to it. The wind rose higher and the rain turned itself about and about. The room became intensely still, so that logs crackling and singing in the fireplace seemed loud and impressive. And because the lights were on in the daytime, the walls seemed immensely substantial, the way they did at night with curtains drawn across the windows and the room closed in upon itself.

"Do you think, Muv——"

Bunny hesitated, fearing at the last moment to expose himself.

"Rain before seven——"

His mother got up from the table, having read his thought, and answered it, severely:

Rain before seven

Clear by eleven.

Bunny was obliged to unwind the proverb in his own mind. There was nothing else for him to do. The words she had left unspoken remained cruelly before his eyes even when he looked down at his plate. With great concentration he began to eat

his cereal. It would have taken a very little thing at that moment to spill his sorrow. Let the clock catch its breath, let one log fall with a sudden shower of sparks up the chimney and he would have wept.

His mother sat down in the window seat and hunted through her sewing-kit impatiently. Bunny could hear her saying to herself that he was a grown man, or nearly so. Eight last August and not yet able to depend on his own strength, but coming to her again and again to be reassured.

Another time, he promised; another time he would try and not give in to weakness. If only she would not be severe with him now. He could not bear to have her that way. Not this morning. . . . Feeling altogether sorry for himself, he began to imagine what it would be like if she were not there. If his mother were not there to protect him from whatever was unpleasant—from the weather and from Robert and from his father—what would he do? Whatever would become of him in a world where there was neither warmth nor comfort nor love?

Rain washed against the window.

When his mother found the needle she had been

looking for, she threaded it. Then she took up a square of white cloth. Her hand flew this way and that, over her sewing. Quite suddenly she spoke to him:

"Bunny, come here."

He got down from his chair at once. But while he stood waiting before her and while she considered him with eyes that were perplexed and brown, the weight grew. The weight grew and became like a stone. He had to lift it each time that he took a breath.

"Whose angel child are you?"

By these words and by the wholly unexpected kiss that accompanied them he was made sound and strong. His eyes met hers safely. With wings beating above him and a great noise as of trumpets and drums he returned to his breakfast.

II

"WHAT are you making? tea towels?"

Bunny noticed that his mother had a very curious way of shaking her head. Rather as if she were shaking away an idea that buzzed.

"They *do* look like tea towels."

The interest which he took in her affairs was practically contemporary. If she were invited to a card party he wanted to know afterward who won

the prize, and what they had to eat, and what the place cards were like. When she went to Peoria to shop he liked to be taken along so that he could pass judgment on her clothes, though it meant waiting for periods of time outside the fitting-room. Nor did they always agree. About the paper in the dining-room, for instance. Bunny thought it quite nice the way it was. Especially the border, which was a hill with the same castle on it every three feet. And the same three knights riding up to each of the castles. Nevertheless, his mother had it done over in plain paper that gave him nothing to think about, and might far better, in his opinion, have been used for the kitchen, where it wouldn't so much matter.

"If they aren't tea towels, what are they?"

He waited impatiently while she bit off the thread and measured a new length from her spool.

"Diapers."

The word started a faint spinning of excitement within him. He went thoughtfully and sat down beside his mother in the window seat. From there he could see the side yard and the fence, Koenig's yard, and the side of Koenig's white house. The Koenigs' were German but they couldn't help that,

and they had a little girl whose name was Anna. In January Anna would be a year old. Mr. Koenig got up very early to help with the washing before he went to work. The washing-machine galumpty-lumped, galumpty-lumped, at five o'clock in the morning. By breakfast time there would be a string of white flags blowing in the autumn wind. They weren't flags, of course; they were diapers. And that was just it. People never made diapers unless somebody was going to have a baby.

Bunny listened. For a moment he was outside in the rain. He was wet and shining. His mind bent from the wind. He detached a wet leaf. But one did not speak of these things.

Always when he and his mother were alone, the library seemed intimate and familiar. They did not speak or even raise their eyes, except occasionally. Yet around and through what they were doing each of them was aware of the other's presence. If his mother were not there, if she was upstairs in her room or out in the kitchen explaining to Sophie about lunch, nothing was real to Bunny—or alive. The vermilion leaves and yellow leaves folding and unfolding upon the curtains depended utterly upon his mother. Without her they had no movement and no color.

Now, sitting in the window seat beside her, Bunny was equally dependent. All the lines and surfaces of the room bent toward his mother, so that when he looked at the pattern of the rug he saw it necessarily in relation to the toe of her shoe. And in a way he was more dependent upon her presence than the leaves or flowers. For it was the nature of his possessions that they could be what they actually were, and also at certain times they could turn into knights and crusaders, or airplanes, or elephants in a procession. If his mother went downtown to cut bandages for the Red Cross (so that when he came home from school he was obliged to play by himself) he could never be sure that the transformation would take place. He might push his marbles around the devious and abrupt pattern of the Oriental rug for hours, and they would never be anything but marbles. He put his hand into the bag now and drew out a yellow agate which became King Albert of Belgium.

A familiar *thump* brought him somewhat painfully again into the world of the library. *Thump thump thump*—all the way across the ceiling. Robert was getting up.

"I've been thinking."