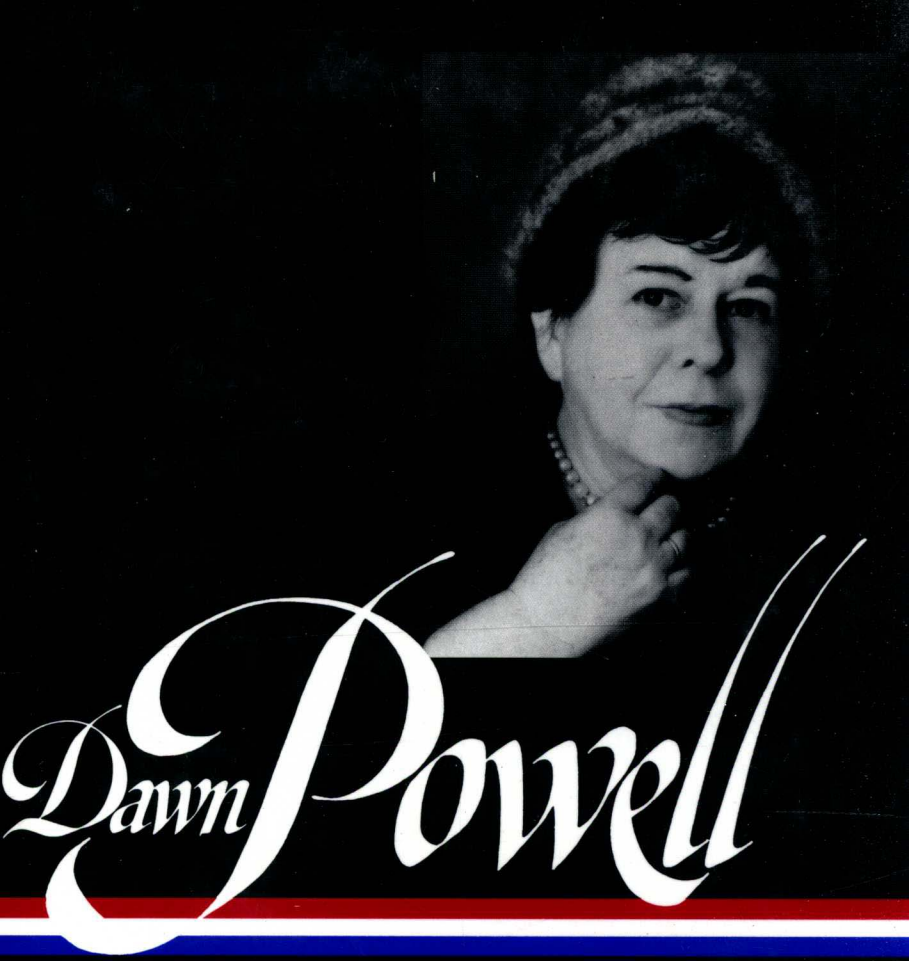

Dawn Powell

Novels 1944–1962

My Home Is Far Away
The Locusts Have No King
The Wicked Pavilion
The Golden Spur

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WROTE THE NOTES FOR THIS VOLUME

Contents

MY HOME IS FAR AWAY

For my cousin,
SERGEANT JACK F. SHERMAN

PART ONE

The Man in the Balloon

I

THIS WAS the month of cherries and peaches, of green apples beyond the grape arbor, of little dandelion ghosts in the grass, of sour grass and four-leaf clovers, of still dry heat holding the smell of nasturtiums and dying lilacs. This was the best month of all and the best day. It was not birthday, Easter, Christmas, or picnic, but all these things and something else, something wonderful, something utterly unknown. The two little girls in embroidered white Sunday dresses knew no way to express their secret joy but by whirling each other dizzily over the lawn crying, "We're moving, we're moving! We're moving to London Junction!"

Down the cinder driveway between the Willard house and Dr. Bird's box hedge rumbled the hay wagon, laden with the Willard furniture. The sudden picture of their home, everything that was theirs, yanked out of its familiar roots like baby teeth and stacked up on wheels, made the children stand still, staring, uncertain. There was their little pine bed standing on end, the baby's high-chair hanging by a rope from the corner pole, the big walnut dresser with its front bulging out like a funny-paper policeman's; there were the two big parlor chairs, wide rockers curved in perpetual grins, wonderful for scooting games; there was the couch bought with coupons—bright yellow fuzzy stuff with red and green caterpillars wiggling circles over it so that it always seemed alive and dangerous; there was the pine kitchen cupboard tied on its back to the dining-table as if it had left its little corner only when overpowered by force. Yes, there went their little yellow house itself, for without these things warming its insides, the little yellow house was nothing but empty doors and windows. They watched the wagon wheels roll relentlessly over the pansy-border and leave deep ruts in the soft new grass, but it didn't matter because they didn't live here any more. Like their furniture, now being brushed by the overhanging branches of

Peach Street, they were suspended in space between the little yellow cottage, Number Twenty-Three, and the unknown towers of London Junction. This must be the reason that time, too, was suspended, for no matter how often they ran to ask their mother the time, it was always nine o'clock, a little before, a little after, but not quite starting time. So round and round they swung each other over the grass, as if this example of speed would whip up the minutes.

"We're moving, we're moving, we're moving to London Junction!" they chanted shrilly. This time they whirled through the gap in the hedge into Dr. Bird's front yard. This was a hushed space, shaded with sleek-leafed bushes, wide-spreading locust trees that dripped feathery green over fern beds below. The sun never came here or into the shuttered, vine-covered house; it was an old people's yard with a cool cemetery smell, suitable for an old man and old lady who never came out further than the plaster old man and lady in the tiny weather-house. Old Dr. Bird sat behind the porch vines, shelling peas into a tin saucepan.

"Hold on there! What's all this?" he called out in a high trembling voice.

"We're moving!" Lena answered. "We're moving to London Junction."

"Here," said the old man. "Here you are, girls. Here's a penny apiece."

They flew to his side.

"Dr. Bird," asked Marcia earnestly, "who will hold the string for you to tie up bundles when I go to London Junction?"

"Nobody," said Dr. Bird. "I'll have to do it myself."

"I'm sorry," said Marcia. "I liked putting a finger on the string. I don't see how you'll get along."

"Never mind, here's your penny," said the old man. "Run along or your folks'll drive off without you."

"Say goodbye to Dr. Bird," their mother called from the surrey now pausing in the driveway. "Well, here we go, Dr. Bird."

"Glad, eh?"

"Indeed I am," their mother answered happily. "You see, I'll be there with Ma and Lois, and besides it's a better place for Harry."

"London Junction, London Junction, London Junction!" sang the two girls and whirled each other round and round across the lawn, down the dusty path till they fell in the geranium bed laughing. Their father, a slight, jaunty figure with a little sandy moustache, in a neat brown-checked suit, came out of the little yellow house carrying the baby in one arm and the red telescope in the other. The red telescope was the very thing in which Dr. Bird had first brought the baby. The two girls had looked in it carefully every morning for over a year to see if any other babies had arrived, but so far none had followed Florrie.

"Get in, get in!" shouted their father. "Do you want to go to London Junction or do you want to stay here?"

They scrambled over the wheels into the back seat of the surrey. The horse and surrey were borrowed from the Busby Hotel where their father had clerked until today. It was a handsome outfit, the shining black surrey with tan fringe twinkling along its top, and the gleaming black horse that Papa himself had "broke" in the field behind the hotel. There were leather storm curtains rolled up to be let down in case of rain, and a silver-trimmed whip in a silver-trimmed socket. This elegance so impressed Marcia and Lena that they sat still, proudly stretching their feet in the new Mary Jane black patent-leather slippers. Dr. Bird limped along the box hedge to the gate and watched them.

"Say hello to Lois for me," he called out. "Bring her over if you come down to Reunion."

"Of course we'll come to Reunion," their mother called back. "Ma never misses it, you know that."

She gathered her skirts carefully about her away from the wheel, and leaned over to take the baby from their father's arms.

"Let *us* hold her!" begged Lena.

Their mother stood up and lifted the baby over the back seat to them. They sat her up between them on the tufted tan cushion. In their excitement they clutched her arms so tightly that her big blue eyes welled with indignant tears.

"Don't pinch," admonished their mother, then called out, "Hurry, Harry, or we'll never get there before dark."

Their father went back to the house and to the barn again, then to the tool-shed for no reason at all, except perhaps to

say goodbye, just as the sunflowers beside the old playhouse seemed to be nodding goodbye. In this moment before leaving, the clouds stood still and seemed very low, as if they might even be stroked if one stood on the treetop and reached high. Above the clouds somewhere was London Junction, beyond the far-off pine fringe that rimmed this world was London Junction, on the other side of the West Woods, sunset boundary of the world, lay London Junction. The children's eyes widened as the whip cracked and the voyage began.

"Goodbye, Dr. Bird. Goodbye, Mrs. Busby," called their mother, waving her handkerchief. A skinny brown hand waved from the lace curtains of the big gray Busby house. Their mother kept waving her handkerchief all the way down Peach Street, as certain as were the children that the whole world was watching their departure. Sure enough hands waved to them from windows, and passing the marketplace Mr. Charles, the butcher, waved his white apron, and Mr. Finney, the druggist, lifted his straw hat, and the delivery boy from the grocery-store put down his basket to salute them like a soldier.

"Where are the kittens?" Lena suddenly asked.

"In the barn, all right," said their father. "In the barn" sounded ominous to the two little girls who exchanged suspicious glances.

"Where's Towser?" demanded Marcia. "Isn't Towser going to London Junction? We've got to go back and get Towser."

"Poor Towser!" sighed their mother. "OH, Harry!"

"What's happened to Towser?" wailed the girls, and then Florrie began to roar in the alarmingly efficient way she had, at two years old, perfected, so that the horse pricked up its ears and started to gallop, their mother reached back hastily to steady the baby, and Papa swore, pulling on the reins.

"Forget about Towser, damn it!" he shouted above the clatter of hoofs and wheels on the brick pavement. "We'll get another dog in London Junction."

"CITY LIMITS" their mother read out to them from a sign.

"Thirty miles now to London Junction," said their father.

Now they really were past the sunset woods on the edge of the world, and their mother began to sing. They all sang with

her. They sang, "There was an old sailor and he had a wooden leg," and "Hark, hark the dogs do bark, the beggars are coming to town," and "A frog he would a woo-ing go." The baby stopped crying. Papa kept the whip out and the horse trotted along at a fine clip. They waved to farmhouses and shouted merry greetings to loads of hay; they waved to children perched on ladders picking cherries and to women at barnyard pumps rounding up geese, for they knew everyone. Mother had been brought up on a farm along here, her brothers' families were strewn all around, and Papa, though he came from another county, knew everyone through managing the hotel and meeting the farmers who hitched every Saturday in the hotel square. But after awhile they did not know the farms; people in fields stared back at them instead of waving. Papa and their mother fell silent.

"I wonder if we'll like London Junction," she said and her voice sounded small. "We don't know anyone but Ma and Lois and the family."

"We'll know plenty," boasted their father. "More people to know, have a better time and have more to do with. They've got asphalt streets in London Junction, and an opera house, and a baseball park."

"But it's so much bigger than Elmville," said their mother. The children, ever watchful, saw that she had taken out her handkerchief. "Of course, I want to be with my own folks, but think of all the people we're leaving. We've known them all our lives. Dr. Bird——"

"Dr. Bird won't have anybody to hold string when he wraps bundles," said Marcia. "Nobody."

Lena was holding Florrie on her lap, squeezing her so tight that now she roared again. The mighty roar that came from this Humpty-Dumpty baby made their father laugh, so they all laughed. Papa leaned over and kissed their mother and for some reason this made the girls laugh all the louder.

"Here," said their father, and handed their mother the reins. "By George, you handle a horse better than any man. Better than me, even."

"Oh no, Harry, not better than you!" their mother protested, quite shocked. "Nobody is as good with a horse as you, Harry—nobody."

Nobody could do anything as well as Harry and that was the truth. The children knew it, their mother knew it, and naturally Harry knew it.

"Well, I like horses," admitted Harry. "And they like me. That's all."

The next village was Oakville, the county seat, and here they stopped to say hello to papa's father, Grandpa Willard, at the Soldiers' Home. The old soldiers sat on benches around the grounds in wheel chairs, either talking to each other or reading, just waiting for gongs to summon them to meals, chapel, or bed. Grandpa Willard was all dressed up in his uniform with the new cork leg his children had given him, and was sitting on a bench busily whittling a whistle out of a stick.

"I been expecting you folks to stop in the last couple weeks," he said. "I made a whistle for each of the kids."

"Getting lonesome for us?" asked Mama.

Grandpa thoughtfully shifted his tobacco to the other cheek, where it made a fascinating egg-like protuberance.

"No time to get lonesome here," he said. "Up early and reading a book or sitting out here figuring, or walking around spotting birds. Seen a couple of partridge back by the creek yesterday. Had a pest of starlings till they let us shoot some. No sirree, they's always plenty to take up your mind without getting lonesome for your folks."

Papa gave him some tobacco, and then mother gave him a new white handkerchief with his initials, R.J.W., which pleased him so much he folded it up carefully in its tissue paper, declaring that it was too fine to use and would have to be put away with his "personal belongings." He called to one of the attendants passing by, to introduce them all proudly, and asked that the event of his son's family calling be written up in an item in the *Home Weekly.*

"By cracky, other folks' families get written up when they visit. I don't see why mine can't," he said with a firm nod of the head.

Papa asked him if there was anything he'd like to have before they drove on, and Grandpa looked rather wistfully at the horse and carriage.

"I sure would like to handle them reins for about ten minutes," he said. "I haven't laid hands on the reins since I been here. Good trotter?"

Papa boasted of the horse's speed, mouth, coat, and general virtues, but then everything that was in any way connected with Papa automatically became superior to all other things of the kind. This horse, he said, was the finest horse in the county, possibly the state. He declared if he had this horse under his care for, say, four weeks he could make her the finest racing nag in the country and Grandpa gravely agreed that this was possible. They examined the points of the animal together and Papa was a little annoyed when Grandpa found a mark on the left hind leg, so Grandpa hastily said the flaw would very likely pass away in a day or two.

"Tell you what, Harry," he said. "You might send me a picture postcard from London Junction. Some of the fellows have quite a collection."

This promise having been given, the old gentleman looked meditatively down at the children and stroked his white moustache. The children beamed back, pleased with his having only one eye and only one leg from the Civil War.

"Harry, maybe you could spare me a little change so as to give the kids something. I don't get my pension till next week."

Their father reached in his pocket and gave him some pennies and a nickel. The old man promptly presented a penny apiece to the two older girls and a nickel to the baby. Marcia and Lena watched their mother pocket the latter.

"Florrie always gets the most," said Marcia.

They regarded their baby sister speculatively.

"Babies got to have money for chewing tobacco," their grandfather said, winking his one eye.

"Thank you so much, father," said their mother earnestly. "I've started a bank account for the baby, and would you believe it, she already has nearly fourteen dollars in it?"

They climbed back in the surrey, while Grandpa made a hurried survey of the grounds to find Captain Somebody who was in charge and a very fine man it would be a pleasure for them to meet. Disappointed in this, he followed them a few yards, calling out last messages.

"Don't bother about the picture postcards if it's going to be too much trouble, Harry," he said. "It ain't a matter of life and death. And say—if they print a piece about you visiting me in the *Home Weekly* next week, I'll send it to you. There's a lot of reading matter in it, so it's worth having anyway. I always save it in my personal belongings."

They thanked him and drove away, leaving him cutting off a chew of tobacco with his penknife.

"I'd like a bank account," said Lena firmly, but her parents paid no heed.

Marcia, too, had been doing some reflecting.

"When I was the baby, I never got any nickels," she stated accusingly. "I would have remembered it if I had."

Marcia's odd and quite useless talent for remembering was a source of astonishment and amusement to her parents. Sometimes in the night her father would pick her out of bed and take her downstairs to entertain the company with her recollections. The company laughed and gasped, but the uncanniness of her memory was not an endearing trait; invariably the guests drew away respectfully from the little freak and warmed all the more to the pretty, unaffected normalcy of little Lena.

"When I was a baby," reflected Marcia gloomily in a louder voice, "Lena got all the nickels because she was the oldest. I only got the pennies."

Lena giggled. Their parents, if they heard, paid no heed but were silent till after they had left Oakville. Then their mother said hesitatingly, "Harry, I felt sorry for Father. None of his own people around. All of you boys, and yet none of you will let him make a home with you. I really think we ought to let him live with us in London Junction when we get settled."

"That's it—when," retorted their father irritably. "No, sir, he's too big a care. He'd drink up his pension and sit around the room all day chewing tobacco. That's all he'd do."

"I get along all right with Father," said their mother. "Don't be hard on him, Harry. Half-blind and only one leg, poor old soul."

The tone of their mother's voice made Marcia and Lena sorry for their grandfather. The things that made him seem

wonderful before—the one eye, the cork leg, the charming companions with equally curious characteristics—all these were changed from wonders to sad misfortunes merely by the pity in their mother's voice. Poor, poor Grandpa! And they had forgotten to sing a song for him, and to thank him for the pennies!

"Whoa, Bess!" their father called out abruptly.

They had come to a crossroads, where a grimy two-story house flaunted a sign, "Four Corners House." The sign was nailed to a dead maple tree, with a rusty pail and tin sap tube still attached to the trunk. A stone watering trough and pump were by the hitching post, and a watchdog was tied outside his kennel, growling fearfully at them. The drab exterior of the house was brightened by gay advertisements pinned to the screen door, and by a clothesline hung with red tablecloths. Their father twisted the reins around the post ring and helped their mother to the ground. Perhaps this was to be a visit, too, with even more pennies in the offing. Their father blighted these hopes by motioning them to sit still.

"You kids stay here. We'll take the baby inside with us."

Their mother jumped into their father's arms, laughing secretly. Her new brown sailor hat fell off and the curly brown bangs blew merrily over her white forehead until she had pinned on her hat once more. From the way Papa picked up Florrie and then hurried their mother into the side door of the building, the children guessed some fun was in the air that was only for grown-ups.

"I know what they're having," said Lena calmly. "They're having beer."

Marcia looked at her six-year-old sister, envious of this superior sophistication.

"Whenever they go in the side door instead of the front door of any place, it means they're having beer to drink," Lena enlarged obligingly. "Like in papa's hotel."

The little treat was plainly not a success, for Florrie's indignant bellow was heard from the moment the screen door closed on them. A few moments later she emerged triumphantly in her mother's arms, round face red with rage, fists in mouth. She was only moderately soothed by being jiggled up and down.

"Spoiled," said their father.

"No, dear, it's just that she wants to keep on riding," explained their mother. True enough, as soon as the carriage started again, Florrie fell blissfully asleep in their mother's arms. They did not stop again till they had come to Venice Corners, half-way to London Junction. Venice Corners was a pretty little village with a white frame church on one side of the main street and a fine brick church on the other. In these towns the brick churches were always the Methodist and the smaller wooden ones were Episcopal or Baptist. When they got to London Junction the children had been promised a brick Sunday school, even though they had been baptized in one of the wooden faiths.

Venice Corners had no purring flour mill like Elmville, and no little lake with rowboats like Oakville, but it countered these charms by being placed on top of a hill so that on either side the little houses marched down step by step, each with its hedge moustache, and a red chimney for a hat. It was after the noon hour now and they were all hungry.

"If we're going to see Chris and Isobel we'd better eat first," said their mother. "We mustn't be any bother to Isobel."

Chris was their mother's cousin.

They drew up under a shade tree on the Methodist Church lawn. Their mother took out the lunch basket and passed out hardboiled eggs, chicken drumsticks, and bread and jam. She wiped off their faces with paper napkins. She fed Florrie from her own lunch, and their father petted the horse, making jokes about keeping horse and carriage instead of returning them to the Busbys. Their mother put the baby in the clothes basket to nap, and began to tidy herself for the visit to Chris and Isobel. She fussed with her jabot, a ripple of white lace fastened with her garnet crescent pin over her brown-and-white checked taffeta waist. Papa tweaked her bangs as fast as she pinned them in place, until she begged, "Oh, darling, please!" She straightened the girls' hair-ribbons and smoothed out their mussed sashes of blue silk. Lena had a new blue bonnet with baby-blue forget-me-nots and velvet streamers. This was because she was the oldest and the prettiest and their father liked to have her look like the little girl on