

THE SIGN OF

Jonah

BY

NANCY HALE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A work of fiction is conceived in much the same way as a dream occurs in the mind of a sleeper. That is to say, places, events, and persons often with opinions wildly at variance with those of the writer, occur in some kind of pattern, without volition, spontaneously. And often these persons, places, and events correspond with real ones experienced by the dreamer or writer in actual life. But in fiction, as in the dream, the context is radically different from that in reality. The context, in brief, is that of the private world of sleeper or author, and not the actual world.

The work of consciousness in fiction is to make communicable to others the meaning of the images thus arranged. With a dream, the only service consciousness can be trained to render is to make intelligible to the dreamer himself the possible significance of his own dream. It has no value to others. The value of a work of fiction rests upon how universal are its fancies—whether this consciously manipulated species of dream has meaning not only for writer but reader.

But to accuse an author of taking real people, real places, real events out of life and putting them into a book is to misunderstand the whole nature of creation. His work is in another dimension than that of outer reality.

As well accuse the dreamer of wilfully taking real persons, places, and events and putting them into the subjective arrangement of his dream. As well say, "How dare you dream of me!"

THE SIGN OF JONAH

“ . . . An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:

For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

MATTHEW 12:39, 40

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I

First Quarter

CHAPTER I

UNTIL 1929 the road between Douro and Castalia remained unpaved. The traveller from the North by this only route to Sherry Courthouse had thus to drive for some forty miles over a broad and deceptively smooth road whose composition would be foreign to him. It was sand and clay, and bright red. In wet weather its surface became as slippery as glass, and any motor but a model-T Ford was liable to slide slowly but inevitably sideways until it landed at an angle in the ditch, there to remain until dragged out by a farmer's team, provided such rescue could be found. There was no gas station in those forty miles.

In the spring of 1928 a seven-passenger touring-car, with H-shift and a right-hand drive, successfully completed this part of its journey, the weather being fair and chilly, and proceeded on its way to Sherry Courthouse.

There were two occupants of the car, a young man in riding-breeches and a young woman of fashionable but eccentric appearance. The sun having sunk at six, they made the hazardous passage from Douro to Castalia in steadily failing light and almost in solitude. Twice in the forty miles they passed a vehicle. Once it was a dilapidated Ford truck loaded with hay; later, when the darkness had settled down over the broad and desolate land around them, a faint, flickering light appeared bobbing ahead of them down the deserted road. It was impossible to tell whether it was a lantern, a fire, or perhaps the ghost-light of the will-o'-the-wisp. Travelling as rapidly as might be, they soon overtook the gleaming.

A wagon covered by a ragged cloth hood was proceeding in the opposite direction. Under the cover beside the driver stood a lantern whose

rays were thus conserved and concentrated. As the car roared by, the two within had a glimpse of the bony horse, the rickety and illuminated cart, and lit by the rays of his lantern, the face of the driver: old, undernourished, and malevolent. In a second they had passed.

"God-damned eerie," the young woman said, lighting a cigarette.

The white-walled tires of the car had become pink with the road dust, which also dulled the high polish on the black car, when they drove without pausing through the small, dirty village of Castalia. Brick shanties and wooden houses badly in need of paint lined the single street and even the pale light of the three street-lamps could not soften their dilapidation.

"But where is the sacred fountain?" the young woman said.

"What?" her companion asked, slowing down at a cross-roads outside the village and training the car's spotlight on the weathered board that bore directions in faded paint.

"You're about as educated as one of your hunters," she said.

"Sherry Courthouse, 5 miles," he read aloud, and shifted the car into second. With a roar the car tore down the indicated road; the roar rose to a whine and the driver shifted into high.

"How about a quick one before we get there?" the young woman said. "My hunch is there won't be anything to drink at Concord."

"Your relatives teetotalers?"

"I told you, I never saw them. They could be Hottentots. But I've got a hunch."

The long heavy car drew to a stop in the darkness, by the side of the road. The headlights caught in the bare branches of a big oak tree in the next field. Between was a wire fence with a barbed strand uppermost; its posts were falling down. No habitation was within range of visibility. The night was very black.

"There can't be any hunting in this country with fences like that," the man said.

"Where's the flask?"

He reached back and groping in the baggage on the floor of the car brought out a big silver flask and handed it to her. She tipped it back and took a long drink and passed it to him.

"How do you even know they'll put us up?" he asked after drinking.

"Long lost relative. Cousin from the North. Auld lang syne. I *don't* know."*

"I can't see why you wanted to come. It's a wild goose chase."

"Good," she said. "I don't know why I want to do anything. Why do I love you?"

"Do you?" he asked, putting the flask down by their feet and reaching for her.

"No," she said, and put her arms around him.

Their embraces kept them silent in the darkness, in the desolation, for a time.

"We've got to get there," she said finally, arranging her short hair by touch and putting on lipstick in the dark. He started up the motor.

They came to Sherry Courthouse at nearly nine. The young man got out and went up to one of the group of brick houses where lights burned. In the single street-light he showed tall, thin, his shanks narrow in his breeches. She saw him speaking in the yellow radiance of the open door. He ran down the broken walk and jumped back into the car.

"Your relatives aren't very popular around here," he said. "She damn near froze me out."

"Still fighting the Civil War, I suppose," she said. "My father used to say his uncle was a fanatic."

"Did he visit them?"

"Roberto? My God no. I told you. There hasn't been any communication between the two branches of the family since—Jesus, I don't know when. Since grandpa took to the fleshpots."

"Fleshpots?"

"To New York, dope. The gay life. Made the Crocker millions. Or some such."

"Why, didn't they like that?"

"How do I know whether they liked it? I told you I've never seen any of them. Grandpa didn't like *them*. He'd had a stomachfull of plain living and high thinking. He never went back to Boston either, once he'd got the hell out."

"And your father didn't like them?"

"My father was busy," she said defensively. "He never had time to mooch round after relatives in exile."

"Then what are you doing . . ."

"Oh, me," she said. "I'm a sentimentalist. I've got plenty of time. I'm looking for trouble."

"You're a sentimentalist? I always felt you put on an act, Sybil. Underneath you're not so hardboiled as you pretend. If you could just let go and be yourself . . ."

"Holy Mother of God," she ejaculated. "I said I was a sentimentalist, not that I was sentimental. You wouldn't know the difference. Where is this damned place?"

"She said two miles down this road . . ." he said.

"So I hurt your feelings. Sorry. Go slow so we can look, can't you?"

They crept along, peering with the help of the spotlight into the wide empty darkness. There were occasional roads running off the main one and they tried one or two that seemed not to lead to any house. At length they followed a two-rut track with grass growing in the center some quarter of a mile and came upon a dwelling that stood up dark against the dark sky.

"Would this be it?" Sybil said.

He trained the spotlight on the house front.

There in the middle of the dark plain the square house stood. It was of brick with two square chimneys in the center. Its construction was plain and unornamented. Even in the pale, concentrated light it was possible to see how neat it was, how fresh the white paint on the woodwork of windows and porch.

"What do you bet this is it," she said. "It could be New England." She slipped out of the car.

As she slammed the car door the front door opened and a youth stood silhouetted in a faint and yellow inside light.

"Are you looking for somebody?" he called into the night.

The driver of the car got out on his side and followed Sybil as she went up the steps of the house, her fur coat clasped around her, her purse under her arm, her skirts coming to the knee of her thin childish legs. He stood behind her, tall and thin, as she approached the boy at the door.

"Are you a Crocker?" she asked, smiling.

He looked doubtful and glanced, as though nervously, behind him back into the house.

"I'm Edward Crocker Buswell," he allowed.

"I'm Sybil Crocker. I'm your cousin from New York. And this is Harry Stokes, who drove me down from Virginia. Can we come in?"

As she spoke a huge form appeared behind the boy. It might have been one of the patriarchs. Half a foot over six, great-shouldered, white-bearded, the old man seemed to fill the hall and overwhelm the others. His great voice when he spoke boomed out like a bell, a voice for commands and speeches.

"Sybil Crocker!" he roared. "Our cousin. I always knew it was a matter of time before one of you would come. Come in! Come in! Welcome to Concord."

Sybil stepped withindoors and put her hand in the immense one.

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume," she said.

The old man laughed.

"I'm your greatuncle," he said. "I am sure you are Caleb's granddaughter, Robert's daughter. I am Enoch Crocker. I am delighted to welcome you, sir," he said to Stokes. "Come in, come in. And these," he continued, opening the door to the right of the hall and disclosing a sitting-room, "—these are your cousins. My dears! This is our cousin from home. This is Sybil Crocker."

CHAPTER II

The scene that met the eyes of the travellers was one anachronistic in modern life, perfect of its kind, as though embalmed from an earlier, gentler age. Harry Stokes of Oyster Bay could never have seen anything like it, and if it was more recognizable to the daughter of "Roberto" Crocker, it was not so because of any experience, but rather as if it had come to life out of the pages of her wide if disorganized reading.

The square, red-papered sitting-room was lighted by two oil lamps, a green-shaded student lamp upon the round center table and a standard lamp near one of the windows where dark red curtains were drawn against the night. A bright log fire sent ruddy shadows flickering across the faces of the group who had been sitting there busy at various evening occupations, and who now were rising in attitudes of greeting.

A middle-aged, white-haired woman with a large, soft face, two remarkably pretty young girls, and a man of fifty with a rockier, plainer face than the others, made up the rest of the family at Concord.

"My dear," said the woman, setting her basket of mending on the center table and coming forward to Sybil, "I am Elizabeth Buswell, Elizabeth Crocker. You don't know how often you have been in our thoughts. And these are your cousins. Felicity—"

The older of the two girls had risen from the table where she had been working on a pile of papers. She now put her arm around Sybil's shoulder and kissed her; when Sybil did not respond, she drew back,

still smiling, warmly. Her face was oval and rosy, her thick hair brown. Even in her plain brown cloth dress of old-fashioned style—a fitted waist and full skirt—Sybil would have thought her beautiful, had not her eyes been drawn by the spectacular looks of the other, younger sister, who was also dressed in a brown gown of timeless mode, simply a woman's dress, adapted to a woman's figure.

“—And your cousin Hope,” said the mother, and the girl came forward from the small table on which was set out a game of chess in progress. She did not attempt to embrace Sybil. She shook hands, while her dark blue eyes played over every aspect of Sybil's appearance—tubular coat, pearl choker and ear-studs, even down to her high-heeled alligator oxfords.

Sybil for her part stared at her cousin's amazing face. The beautiful bones were covered by clear, transparent, colorless skin. The hair that framed that face in masses was blue-black, the eyes were long and large, the mouth and nose were chiselled. It was a face that would have been breathtaking anywhere, but come upon in the dim-lit old sitting-room of a house in the middle of the Southern nowhere, it seemed completely fabulous. Sybil frankly stared, and was only distracted by the mother's voice:

“And this is my husband. He would be your cousin Arthur,” she added as though tentatively.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am,” the man said. His speech was slurred and Southern, his manners countrified. He held in his left hand the farm paper which he had been reading.

The others, though quaint and old-fashioned in their manners, bore an unmistakeable air of distinction, and had a correct, rather precise use of English. Mr. Buswell struck the one note of the country—he seemed a plain, uneducated farmer. He did not fit the scene with its odd flavor of New England half a century ago.

“Sit down, sit down,” boomed the old man, shutting the sitting-room door and drawing a chair for Sybil to the fire. “Tell your times and tell them long.”

Sybil glanced at him as she sat down. “Grandpa used to say that,” she said. She slipped out of the coat she had worn into the room, and the boy Edward took it from her and carried it out to the hall, shutting the door again as he re-entered the room. Sybil watched him return, while she lit a cigarette she had taken from the case in her purse. He had his beautiful sister's black hair, and his face was so delicately made that he might have been a girl himself, except for the faint darkness

of beard on his chin. Like his sisters he was tall, and slenderly built, and like theirs, his manner was quaint and distinguished.

"—He was my brother Caleb," the old man was saying. "It is strange to realize that you saw him, long after our own last meeting. That was in Boston, when I reported to the Freedmen's Society in Sixty-eight. I went back once more, but Caleb had moved to New York."

Sybil flicked her ash into the fire and said, "Yes. You've been here a long time, Uncle Enoch. My father used to wonder that you never moved North again. Afterwards . . . You must like it here," she remarked in her husky, clipped, New York voice.

The old man hesitated before replying, and Mrs. Buswell broke into the pause.

"*Like it!*" she ejaculated.

But the old man raised his huge hand for silence.

"Hope has kept me here," he said, and for a moment Sybil thought he meant his granddaughter. "I have always had hope, through it all."

"Hope?"

"I hope to be a witness of freedom," he said gravely.

Mrs. Buswell made a clicking noise with her tongue and bent her head lower over her sewing so that her face was in shadow.

If the old man heard it he ignored it.

"Tomorrow I will show you Concord, and what I have tried to do, and what I have succeeded in doing," he said. "—But tonight you must bring us up to date on your side. You come to us as a voyager from the great world, and, even more, one of our own blood. Tell me, how is your father? How is Robert?"

"My father died a year ago," Sybil said, and her face stiffened.

"I am grieved," Enoch Crocker said, gazing at her out of his great, sunken, prophet's eyes. "We have known little of the family, you know."

Sybil lit a fresh cigarette from her first one; her hand shook a trifle.

"Yes, I know," she said, her voice becoming louder. "You're by way of being a myth to me, do you know. When I was a kid, I used to imagine coming down here and discovering you."

"And now you have discovered us," Enoch Crocker said. There was no note of irony in his deep bell-toned voice. "May the family never be separated again."

Sybil flicked an ash.

"But tell us of your trip," Enoch continued. "What are your impressions of the South?"

Sybil glanced across the hearth at Harry. He had been smoking in silence, with his booted legs thrust out in front of him to the blaze. Sybil shrugged her shoulders restlessly.

"Well, it's fantastic, of course," she began.

"You don't like it?" Mrs. Buswell asked eagerly, lifting her head.

Enoch Crocker was lifting his hand, when the sitting-room door opened.

A tall young colored man stood in the doorway.

"I fetched up the truck," he said, addressing himself to Mr. Buswell. "Mr. Perkins said it was the cam shaft . . ." He saw Sybil and Stokes and stopped.

"Sybil—Mr. Stokes—this is Gordon Greene, our most valuable worker," the grandfather said, with a gesture of his huge hand. "Gordon, I want you to meet our cousin, who comes from New York. And her friend, who drove her here."

The young man came forward without embarrassment and shook hands with Sybil and Harry.

He was a magnificent human being. The color of light polished oak, his features were strong and clean-cut.

"I hope you-all will enjoy your stay," he said courteously. "It's fine to have kin of Mr. Crocker's come visitin'."

"Gordon is the grandson of Chard Greene, my first helper at Concord," the old man said. "The Greene family has been my mainstay. None of them has ever deserted me."

"Wouldn't want ever to desert you, sir," the young man said.

"Draw up, Gordon. Our cousin is telling us of her trip."

"Thank you, Mr. Crocker, but I can't sit down now. That Clover is needin assistance real bad," Gordon said.

"Of course. You are right to put our animal dependents first. Clover is in calf," the old man said to Sybil. "—You think before morning, Gordon?"

"Any time now, Mr. Crocker. So, if you all will excuse me. . . ." The young man made a bow and went out, closing the door after him.

"Gordon is a first-rate man," Enoch Crocker said. "Anywhere else, he'd have his own prosperous farm."

"Isn't he handsome?" Sybil remarked casually. "I could go for a man that looked like that."

Her words dropped like a stone into the gentle atmosphere of the room. Mrs. Buswell caught her breath. Both girls looked at Sybil, Felicity as though perplexed, Hope with large, intent eyes. Mr. Bus-

well picked up his farm paper and began to read it. Edward only blinked.

Enoch cleared his throat with an enormous noise.

"Tomorrow I will show you over Concord," he said once more. "In the meantime . . . a little refreshment, I think. Elizabeth—girls—? Our visitors must be hungry indeed. We have forgotten their needs in the excitement of the reunion."

Mrs. Buswell and Felicity slipped out.

Hope did not stir. She sat before the abandoned chess-board with red firelight playing over her face. Sybil, half-amused at the effect of her remark, returned to admiring her cousin.

Hope's face was as nearly perfect, she thought, as a face could be. She looked for a defect and could find none, unless it were, perhaps, in the line of the lips; a trifle narrow. Some day those lips might be hard. But tonight, bathed in the radiance of her youth, Hope was the most beautiful girl Sybil had ever seen.

"You must tell us of your own life," Enoch Crocker urged.

"My life," Sybil repeated vaguely. "Oh, *you* know. No, of course you don't. Well, I live on Sixty-seventh Street, the house Grandpa built. It's fantastic, of course; huge; frightfully Victorian. People think it's amusing. And it's got all Roberto's things . . . pictures . . .

"Well—sometimes I work, get a job. But I get bored. And why the hell should I work, after all?—Sorry, Uncle Enoch," she added, to her own surprise.

"Well—it's not too bad, I guess. The parties. Lots of divine people. Of course, Roberto knew everyone—all the great talents—I've sort of inherited them. Do tell me," she said with an impatient change of focus, "what are all those papers that Felicity was working on? It intrigues me; you all seem so intellectual."

Sybil had talked rapidly, indifferently. She hurried through her words as though she lost interest in them by the time they came to tongue. She seemed restless and dissatisfied with her own words.

"That," the old man said in his deep voice, "is the *Concord Breeze*. The community paper. We've always had one. We circulate it through the place once a week. Felicity does the work of editing. Hope writes the personal notes—the most popular feature. Edward contributes poetry. I try to write an editorial every week which will have a bearing on the affairs of Concord. And we always, of course, carry contributions from the people on the place, to encourage their thinking and to give them a pride in their own intellectual production."