

Granny Anna

Nancy N. Baxter

THE BEDROOM where Granny Anna spent her hours, either in the bed or in her dainty French chair, was large and cluttered. Fifty years of household accumulation, of Chippendale, Spanish Provincial, and Bamboo, were clustered on the faded lavender and blue rug together with the "finds" of dusty foreign shops.

There were painted iron bedsteads in the fashion of the 1920's, sun-streaked pink damask drapes fringed with glass balls, and a Venetian black-enameled coffee table with an inset of a Flamingo. In the corner posed a nude white Florentine marble maiden with a modest Gibson-girl face. A thermometer in a hobnail glass was beside her. The room was silent with a kind of hopeless sickroom heaviness, and it smelled of musty lillies-of-the-valley, alcohol, and cigars.

Dominating the wall above the beds was an enormous engraving of the Gothic Lodge Cathedral downtown. Underneath was a bronze plaque: "To H. R. Holtz with admiration." (At a banquet in 1910 Grandfather had suggested plans for the Cathedral in a speech which ended, "Gentlemen, I will now start the donations with this \$20,000 check." He was greeted with a standing ovation.)

Now, as Frankie entered the room he found Granny Anna in her chair, her shoulders hunched and drooping, a pink shawl clutched in her bird-like hand. He looked at his mother's face, which still retained a shadow of beauty in its delicate, round lines in spite of blue eyes that had faded and clouded and the too-sharp nose and chin. Her head, pink through shreds of Christmas angel hair which barely covered it, was turned. He placed himself squarely before her.

"Hello, Mother dear," he said, kissing her cool cheek.

"Frankie, is that you?" she asked in a hoarsely hollow voice, feeling the sleeve of his rough, tweed coat.

"How's my girl today," Frankie said heartily.

"All right, dear. Sit down," she directed, weakly raising her hand.

"Did you sleep well, Mother?"

His mother turned her half-seeing eyes to the window before answering. A female cardinal bent a branch of the Beech tree; it moved in a reddish-tan blur. "No, dear. You know I have to be moved so often in the night. I don't seem comfortable anywhere . . . but don't let's talk of that."

Frankie looked vaguely alarmed. His pink baby's face darkened, then brightened as he asked. "Has anyone else been in today?"

His mother sighed. "Hap was in right after breakfast. He told me about his trip to the Bosporus. They will be going on a-what?" Her mind strayed and then her voice trailed off.

"A tramp steamer," her son prompted. There was a silence.

His mother forced herself to straighten up, and cleared her throat scratchily.

"I see you got the yellow Chrysanthemum plant we sent," he mused, looking at a bedside table.

"What? Oh yes," his mother said, smiling a pasty, painful smile.

Frankie scooted his chair nearer to his mother's and picked up her small, blue-veined hand. "Mother dear, I'm bringing you in a special surprise. Until you can read more easily, I'm having the Sound Shop send out a Phonograph with a record of four famous poems read by John Charles Thomas. There's the "Chambered Nautilus," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and "The Wreck of the Hesperus." He was hopeful and handsome.

"Wonderful, dear." His mother's voice was a halting whisper. She sank wearily back into the pillow. "And now I'm terribly tired. Thank you for stopping by."

At the door he hesitated. "One of these days you'll meet me coming downstairs," he said.

"Yes, dear," she replied tiredly, and called for the nurse to put her back in bed. Her mouth fell gaping as she dozed off. She blinked her eyes open when a slight, freckled girl in shorts slipped in and tiptoed to the bedside. She might have been in her late twenties; she wore tennis shoes and had a low musical voice.

"Granny Anna," she said, and her fragrant silky hair brushed the old woman's cheek as she bent to kiss her.

The grandmother opened her eyes wide. "Marnie?" she asked, and reached for her hand. "Prop me up." Neither of them said a word. Marnie held her grandmother's hand smiling, then looked out the leaded window panes comfortably at the rain which was beginning to fall. Finally she said in a low tone, "What can I get for you, Granny Anna?"

Her grandmother tried to speak, then suffered a temporary lapse. "Ah, ah," she stammered. Then the words came, "Nothing on this earth."

Marnie stroked her hand, in the soothing way she would have stroked a kitten.

"How is it going?" she asked.

Granny Anna laid her head against the pillows and smiled vacantly. She looked like a mouse staring out of a white hole. "Dr. Cotten is doing his best in what they call maintainative geriatrics. He keeps me alive by force, filling me with drugs and tubes, keeping my poor tired body so busy with flooding and purging that it never has a chance to think of" (the word was barely audible) "expiring."

"What do you want, darling?" said the girl softly.

Granny Anna looked at her lithe, lovely granddaughter, so young, so intuitively understanding. She could see her clearly now; she looked into her eyes.

"I just want to die," she said firmly.

Marnie was silent for a long while, looking out the window.

Then she put her cheek beside her grandmother's.

"I'll pray for it," she said; then kissing her grandmother, she again left the room.

The Broken Blade

Clarice Noland

I.

THE BOYS scampered across the lawn, tearing their faded jeans as they scrambled down the embankment to the sidewalk. Once on the pavement, they picked themselves up and gathered around Stevie, their leader. He was staring toward a boy who was his opposite. As he raised his head proudly, Stevie's eyes flashed blue sparks. He tossed his blond head and clenched his fists for the attack he felt was inevitable. A few yards from him stood the boy at whom he gazed. Jimmy was dark with brown hair and eyes. He was a head shorter than Stevie, but his stocky frame supported as much weight as did the blond boy's lithe body.

While Stevie eyed him with puzzlement and contempt, Jimmy's dark eyes glittered with hatred and resentment. He leaned backwards for a moment as though gathering his forces, then crouched slightly forward. Springing swiftly, he caught the boys off balance. Jimmy grabbed Stevie around the waist with both arms, and his momentum sent them both crashing into the fleet of bicycles parked in front of Stevie's house. The two boys, disentangling themselves from each other and the broken spokes, did not drop their eyes from each other's faces.

"You bum," muttered Stevie, wiping blood from a gash on his temple. Jimmy said nothing. He stood for a moment staring at his enemy, then, swinging quickly to face the other boys, he froze them with a threatening glance, turned on his heel, and stalked away. In a second Stevie was on his feet. Seeing their leader in charge again, the other boys surged forward; but in that instant, Jimmy whirled around, crouching panther-like, and transfixing them all, as a contemptuous smile twisted his lips. While Jimmy stood there, Stevie shrugged his shoulders and started up the embankment to his porch, motioning the others to follow with a wave.

Alone on the field, the little dark rebel stood looking up at the boys, who were reassembling at the brick parapet, looking himself much like a knight challenging the castle to send its champions out to do battle. As he walked on down the street, Jimmy could feel their eyes on him.

"You . . . you . . . fink!" Stevie screamed, his rage finding voice at last. His older brother and his friends always used that word when they talked about someone they didn't like.

Jimmy lost stride, walking stiff-legged a few steps. Two demons were fighting for control in his body—one wanting to rush up onto the porch and pound Stevie; the other wanting very much to run home into his mother's arms. The second demon won, and his