



C H A P T E R 2 4

OUR FIRST CHILD, LANGDON CLEMENS, WAS BORN THE 7TH OF November, 1870, and lived twenty-two months. I was the cause of the child's illness. His mother trusted him to my care and I took him for a long drive in an open carriage for an airing. It was a raw, cold morning but he was well wrapped about with furs and, in the hands of a careful person, no harm could have come to him. But I soon dropped into a daydream and forgot all about my charge. The furs fell away and left his legs uncovered. By and by the coachman noticed this and I arranged the wraps again, but it was too late. The child was stiff with cold. I hurried home with him. I was horrified at what I had done and I feared the consequences. I have always felt shame for that morning's carelessness and have not allowed myself to think of it when I could help it. I doubt if I had the courage to make confession at that time. I think it most likely that I have never confessed until now.

Susy was born the 19th of March, 1872. The summer seasons of her childhood were spent at Quarry Farm on the hills east of Elmira, New York; the other seasons of the year at the home in Hartford, where we moved in 1871. Like other children she was gay and happy, fond of play; unlike the average child, she was at times much given to retiring within herself and trying to search out the hidden meanings of

the deep things that make the puzzle of human existence.

When Susy was aged seven her mother several times said to her, "There, there, Susy, you mustn't cry over little things."

This furnished Susy food for thought. She had been breaking her heart over what had seemed vast tragedy—a broken toy, an outing called off by thunder and lightning and rain, the mouse that was growing tame and friendly in the nursery caught and killed by the cat. (How do you tell the great things from the small ones?) She examined the problem earnestly and long. At last she gave up and went to her mother for help.

"Mamma, what is 'little things'?"

It seemed a simple question—at first. And yet before the answer could be put into words, unsuspected and unexpected difficulties began to appear. They increased; they multiplied. The effort to explain came to a standstill. Then Susy tried to help her mother out—with an instance, an example, an illustration. The mother was getting ready to go downtown, and one of her tasks was to buy a long-promised toy watch for Susy.

"If you forgot the watch, Mamma, would that be a little thing?"

She was not concerned about the watch, for she knew it would not be forgotten. What she was hoping for was that the answer would bring rest and peace to her troubled little mind.

The hope was disappointed, of course—for the reason that the size of bad luck is not determinable by an outsider's measurement of it but only by the measurements applied to it by the person specially affected by it. The king's lost crown is a vast matter to the king but of no consequence to the child. The lost toy is a great matter to the child but in the king's eyes it is not a thing to break the heart about.

As a child Susy had a passionate temper, and it cost her many tears before she learned to govern it; but after that it was a flavourous salt and her character was the stronger and healthier for its presence. It enabled her to be good with dignity; it preserved her not only from being good for pride's sake but from even the appearance of it. In looking back over the long-vanished years it seems but natural and excusable that I

should dwell with longing affection and preference upon incidents of her young life that made it beautiful to us, and that I should let its few and small things that offended go unmentioned.

In the summer of 1880, when Susy was just eight years of age, the family were at Quarry Farm, on top of a high hill three miles from Elmira. Haycutting time was coming near and Susy and Clara were counting the hours, for the time was of great importance for them; they had been promised that they might climb on the wagon and ride home from the fields on the top of the mountain of hay. This privilege, so dear to their age and kind, had never been granted them before. They could talk of nothing but this history-making adventure now. But misfortune overtook Susy on the very morning of that important day. In a sudden outbreak of temper she hit Clara with a stick. The offense committed was of a seriousness clearly beyond the limit allowed in the nursery. In accordance with the rule and custom of the house, Susy went to her mother to confess and to help decide upon the size and character of the punishment due. It was quite understood that a punishment could have but one object—to act as a reminder and warn the sinner against sinning in the same way again. Susy and her mother discussed various punishments but none of them seemed sufficient. This fault was an unusually serious one and required the setting up of a danger signal in the memory that would not blow out nor burn out but remain there and furnish its saving warning indefinitely. Among the punishments mentioned was not being allowed the hay-wagon ride. It was noticeable that this one hit Susy hard. Finally, in the summing up, the mother named over the list and asked, “Which one do you think it ought to be, Susy?”

Susy studied, avoided her duty, and asked, “Which do you think, Mamma?”

“Well, Susy, I would rather leave it to you. You make the choice yourself. “

It cost Susy a struggle and much and deep thinking and weighing—but she came out where anyone who knew her could have known she would:

“Well, Mamma, I’ll make it the hay wagon, because, you know, the other things might not make me remember not to do it again, but if I don’t get the ride on the hay wagon I can remember it easily.”

In this world the real penalty, the sharp one, the lasting one, never falls otherwise than on the wrong person. It was not I that hit Clara but the remembrance of poor Susy’s lost hay ride still brings me a feeling as though I had been punished after twenty-six years.