**Fairy Godmother**

Aldous Huxley

I

AT 17 Purlieu Villas it was a fairy godmother’s arrival. The enormous Daimler-it looked larger than the house itself—rolled whispering up the street, dark blue and discreetly lustrous. (“Like stars on the sea”—the darkly glittering Daimler always reminded Susan of the Hebrew Melodies—“when the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.”) Between lace curtains eyes followed its passage; it was rarely that forty horses passed these suburban windows. At the gate of Number Seventeen the portent came to a halt. The chauffeur jumped down and opened the door. The fairy godmother emerged.

Mrs Escobar was tall and slender, so abnormally so, that, fashionably dressed, she looked like a fashion-plate—fabulously elegant, beyond all reality.

She was wearing black to-day—a black suit very thinly piped at the cuffs and collar, at the pockets and along the seams of the skirt, with red. A high muslin stock encased her neck and from it depended an elaborate frill, which projected from between the lapels of her coat like the idly waving fin of a tropical fish. Her shoes were red; there was a touch of red in the garnishing of her gloves, another in her hat.

She stepped out of the car and, turning back towards the open door, “Well, Susan,” she said, “you don’t seem to be in any hurry to get out.”

Susan, who was bending down to pick up the parcels scattered on the floor of the car, looked up.

“I’m just coming,” she said.

She reached hurriedly for the bunch of white roses and the terrine of foie gras. Reaching, she dropped the box containing the chocolate cake.

Mrs Escobar laughed. “You old goose,” she said, and a charming mockery set her voice deeply vibrating. “Come out and let Robbins take the things. You’ll take them, Robbins,” she added in a different tone, turning to the chauffeur, “you’ll take them, won’t you?”

She looked at him intimately; her smile was appealing, almost languishing.

“Won’t you, Robbins?” she repeated, as though she were asking the most immense of personal favours.

That was Mrs Escobar’s way. She liked to endow every relationship, the most casual, the most business-like or formal, with a certain intimate, heart-to-heart quality. She talked to shop assistants about their sweethearts, smiled at servants as though she wanted to make them her confidants or even her lovers, discussed philosophy with the plumber, gave chocolates to district messenger boys and even, when they were particularly cherubic, maternally kissed them. She wanted to “get into touch with people,” as she called it, to finger and tweak their souls and squeeze the secrets out of their hearts. She wanted everybody to be aware of her, to like and adore her at first sight. Which did not prevent her from flying into rages with the shop assistants who could not provide her immediately with precisely the thing she wanted, from violently abusing the servants when they failed to answer the bell with a sufficient promptitude, from calling the dilatory plumber a thief and a liar, from dismissing the messenger boy who brought a present from the wrong admirer, not only chocolateless and unkissed, but without even a tip.

“Won’t you?” And her look seemed to add, “for my sake.” Her eyes were long and narrow. The lower lid described an almost straight horizontal line, the upper a gradual curve. Between the lids, a pair of pale blue irises rolled their lights expressively this way and that.

The chauffeur was young and new to his post. He blushed, he averted his eyes. “Oh yes, m’m, of course,” he said, and touched his cap.

Susan abandoned the chocolate cake and the foie gras and stepped out. Her arms were full of parcels and flowers.

“You look like a little Mother Christmas,” said Mrs Escobar, playfully affectionate. “Let me take something.” She selected the bunch of white roses, leaving to Susan the bag of oranges, the cold roast chicken, the tongue and the teddy bear.

Robbins opened the gate; they stepped into the little garden.

“Where’s Ruth?” said Mrs Escobar. “Isn’t she expecting us?” Her voice expressed disappointment and implied reproof. Evidently, she had expected to be met at the gate and escorted across the garden.

“I suppose she couldn’t leave Baby,” said Susan, looking anxiously at Mrs Escobar over the top of her heaped-up parcels. “One can never be certain of being able to do what one wants when one’s got children, can one?” Still, she wished that Ruth had turned up at the gate. It would be dreadful if Mrs Escobar were to think her negligent or ungrateful. “Oh, Ruth, do come!” she said to herself, and she wished so hard that she found herself clenching her fists and contracting the muscles of her stomach.

The fists and the abdominal muscles did their work, for the door of the house suddenly burst open and Ruth came running down the steps, carrying Baby on her arm.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Escobar,” she began. “But, you see, Baby was just …”

Mrs Escobar did not allow her to finish her sentence. Momentarily clouded, her face lit up again. She smiled, ravishingly. Her eyelids came still closer together; little lines radiated out from them, a halo of charming humour. “Here’s little Mother Christmas,” she said, pointing at Susan. “Loaded with goodness knows what! And a few poor flowers from me.” She raised the roses to her lips, kissed them and touched Ruth’s cheek with the half-opened flowers. “And how’s this delicious person?” She took the child’s little hand and kissed it. The child looked at her with large, grave eyes—candid and, by reason of their candour, profoundly critical, like the eyes of an angel on the day of judgment.

“How do you do,” he said in his solemn, childish voice.

“Sweet pet!” said Mrs Escobar and paid no further attention to him. She was not much interested in children. “And you, my dear?” she asked, addressing herself to Ruth. She kissed her. She kissed her on the lips.

“Very well, thanks, Mrs Escobar.”

Mrs Escobar scrutinized her at arm’s-length one hand on Ruth’s shoulder. “You certainly look well, my dear child,” she said. “And prettier than ever.” She thrust the great sheaf of roses into the crook of the young mother’s unoccupied arm. “What a sweet little Madonna!” she exclaimed, and, turning to Susan, “Did you ever see anything more charming?” she asked. Susan smiled and nodded, rather awkwardly; after all, Ruth was her elder sister. “And so absurdly, absurdly young!” Mrs Escobar went on. “Why, it’s positively a détournement de mineur, your being married and having a baby. Do you know, my dear, you really look younger than Susan. It’s a scandal.”

Embarrassed by Mrs Escobar’s point-blank praises, Ruth blushed. And it was not modesty alone that brought the blood to her cheeks. This insistence on the youthfulness of her appearance humiliated her. For it was mostly due, this air of childishness, to her clothes. She made her own frocks—rather “artistic” little affairs in brightly coloured linens or large checks—made them in the only way she knew how or had time to make them: straight up and down, with a yoke and no sleeves, to be worn over a shirt. Monotonously schoolgirlish! But what can you do, if you can’t afford to buy decent clothes? And her bobbed hair was dreadfully schoolgirlish too. She knew it. But again, what could she do about that? Let it grow? It would be such a trouble to keep tidy, and she had so little time. Have it shingled? But she would need to get it waved as well, and it would always have to be kept trimmed by a good hairdresser. All that meant money. Money, money, money!

No, if she looked so preposterously young, that was simply because she was poor. Susan was a baby, five years her junior. But she looked more grown-up. She looked grown-up, because she was properly dressed in frocks from a real dressmaker. Grown-up clothes, though she was only seventeen. And her cropped brown hair was beautifully waved. Mrs Escobar gave Susan everything she wanted. Every blessed thing.

Suddenly she found herself hating and despising this enviably happy sister of hers. After all, what was she? Just a little pet lap-dog in Mrs Escobar’s house. Just a doll; Mrs Escobar amused herself by dressing her up, playing with her, making her say “Mama”. It was a despicable position, despicable. But even as she thought of Susan’s contemptibleness, she was complaining to the fates which had not permitted her to share Susan’s beatitude. Why should Susan have everything, when she …?

But then, all at once, she remembered Baby. She turned her head impulsively and kissed the child’s round, peach-pink cheek. The skin was smooth, soft and cool, like the petal of a flower. Thinking of Baby made her think of Jim. She imagined how he would kiss her when he came back from work. And this evening, while she sewed, he would read aloud from Gibbon’s Decline and Fall. How she adored him, when he sat there in his spectacles, reading! And the curious way he pronounced the word “Persians”—not “Pershuns,” but “Perzyans.” The thought of the Perzyans made her violently wish that he were there beside her, so that she could throw her arms round his neck and kiss him. Perzyans, Perzyans—she repeated the word to herself. Oh, how she adored him!

With a sudden outburst of affection, intensified at once by repentance for her odious thoughts and the recollection of Jim, she turned to her sister.

“Well, Sue,” she said. They kissed over the cold roast chicken and the tongue.

Mrs Escobar looked at the two sisters and, looking, was filled with pleasure. How charming they were, she thought; how fresh and young and pretty! She felt proud of them. For after all, were they not in some sort her own invention? A couple of young girls, nicely brought up, luxuriously even; then suddenly orphaned and left without a penny. They might simply have sunk, disappeared and never been heard of again. But Mrs Escobar, who had known their mother, came to the rescue. They were to come and live with her, poor children! and she would be their mother. A little ungratefully, as it always seemed to her, Ruth had preferred to accept young Jim Waterton’s offer of a premature and hazardous marriage. Waterton had no money, of course; he was only a boy, with all his career to make. But Ruth had made her choice, deliberately. They had been married nearly five years now. Mrs Escobar had been a little hurt. Still, she had periodically paid her fairy godmother’s visits to Purlieu Villas; she had stood plain human godmother to the baby. Susan, meanwhile, who was only thirteen when her father died, had grown up under Mrs Escobar’s care. She was rising eighteen now, and charming.

“The greatest pleasure in the world,” Mrs Escobar was fond of saying, “is being kind to other people.” Particularly, she might have added, when the other people are young and ravishing little creatures who worship you.

“Dear children,” she said, and, coming between them, she put an arm round either’s waist. She felt all at once deeply and beautifully moved—much as she felt when she heard the Sermon on the Mount or the story of the woman taken in adultery read out in church. “Dear children.” Her rich voice trembled a little, the tears came into her eyes. She pressed the two girls more closely to her. Interlaced, they walked along the path towards the door of the house. Robbins followed at a respectful distance, carrying the foie gras and the chocolate cake.

II

“But why isn’t it a train?” asked Baby.

“But it’s such a lovely bear.”

“Such a beautiful … .” Susan insisted.

The faces of the sisters expressed an embarrassed anxiety. Who could have foreseen it? Baby hated the teddy bear. He wanted a train, and nothing but a train. And Mrs Escobar had chosen the bear herself. It was a most special bear, comic in a rather artistic way, don’t you know; made of black plush, with very large eyes of white leather and boot-buttons.

“And see how it rolls,” wheedled Ruth. She gave the animal a push; it rolled across the floor. “On wheels,” she added. Baby had a weakness for wheels.

Susan reached out and drew the bear back again. “And when you pull this string,” she explained, “it roars.” She pulled the string. The bear squeaked hoarsely.

“But I want a train,” insisted the child. “With rails and tunnels and signals.” He called them siggernals.

“Another time, my darling,” said Ruth. “Now go and give your bear a big kiss. Poor Teddy! He’s so sad.”

The child’s lips trembled, his face became distorted with grief, he began to cry. “I want siggernals,” he said. “Why doesn’t she bring me siggernals?” He pointed accusingly at Mrs Escobar.

“Poor pet,” said Mrs Escobar. “He shall have his siggernals.”

“No, no,” implored Ruth. “He really adores his bear, you know. It’s just a foolish idea he’s got into his head.”

“Poor little pet,” Mrs Escobar repeated. But how badly brought up the child was, she thought. So spoiled, and blasé already. She had taken such trouble about the bear. A real work of art. Ruth ought to be told, for her own good and the child’s. But she was so touchy. How silly it was of people to be touchy about this sort of thing! Perhaps the best thing would be to talk to Susan about it and let her talk to Ruth quietly, when they were alone together.

Ruth tried to make a diversion. “Look at this lovely book Mrs Escobar has brought you.” She held up a brand new copy of Lear’s Book of Nonsense. “Look.” She turned over the pages invitingly before the child’s eyes.

“Don’t want to look,” Baby replied, determined to be a martyr. In the end, however, he could not resist the pictures. “What’s that?” he asked, sulkily, still trying to pretend that he wasn’t interested.

“Would you like me to read you one of these lovely poems?” asked Mrs Escobar, heaping coals of fire on the despiser of the bear.

“Oh yes,” cried Ruth with an anxious eagerness. “Yes, please.”

“Please,” repeated Susan.

Baby said nothing, but when his mother wanted to hand the book to Mrs Escobar, he tried to resist… . “It’s my book,” he said in a voice of loud and angry complaint.

“Hush,” said Ruth, and stroked his head soothingly. He relinquished the book.

“Which shall it be?” asked Mrs Escobar, turning over the pages of the volume. “‘The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo’? Or ‘The Pobble who has no Toes’? Or ‘The Dong’? Or ‘The Owl and the Pussy Cat’? Which?” She looked up, smiling inquiringly.

“ ‘The Pobble,’ ” suggested Susan.

“I think ‘The Owl and the Pussy Cat’ would be the best to begin with,” said Ruth. “It’s easier to understand than the others. You’d like to hear about the Pussy, wouldn’t you, darling?”

The child nodded, unenthusiastically.

“Sweet pet!” said Mrs Escobar. “He shall have his Pussy. I love it too.” She found her place in the book, “ ‘The Owl and the Pussy Cat,’ ” she announced in a voice more richly and cooingly vibrant than the ordinary. Mrs Escobar had studied elocution with the best teachers, and was fond of acting, for charity. She had been unforgettable as Tosca in aid of the Hoxton Children’s Hospital. And then there was her orthopaedic Portia, her tuberculous Mrs Tanqueray (or was Mrs. Tanqueray for the incurables?).

“What’s a owl?” asked Baby.

Interrupted, Mrs Escobar began a preliminary reading of the poem to herself; her lips moved as she read.

“An owl’s a kind of big funny bird,” his mother answered and put her arm round him. She hoped he’d keep quieter if she held him like this.

“Do nowls bite?”

“Owls, darling, not nowls.”

“Do they bite?”

“Only when people tease them.”

“Why do people tease them?”

“Sh-sh!” said Ruth. “Now you must listen. Mrs Escobar’s going to read you a lovely story about an owl and a pussy.”

Mrs Escobar, meanwhile, had been studying her poem. “Too charming!” she said, to nobody in particular, smiling as she spoke with eyes and lips. “Such poetry, really, though it is nonsense. After all, what is poetry but nonsense? Divine nonsense.” Susan nodded her agreement. “Shall I begin?” Mrs Escobar inquired.

“Oh, do,” said Ruth, without ceasing to caress the child’s silky hair. He was calmer now.

Mrs Escobar began:—

“‘The aul and the pooseh-cut went to sea

In a beautiful (after a little pause and with intensity) pea-grreen boat.

They took some honey and (the rich voice rose a tone and sank) plenty of money,

Wrapped (little pause) up (little pause) in a five-pound note.’”

“What’s a five-pound note?” asked Baby.

Ruth pressed her hand more heavily on the head, as though to squeeze down his rising curiosity. “Sh-sh!” she said.

Ignoring the interruption, Mrs Escobar went on, after a brief dramatic silence, to the second stanza.

“ ‘The aul looked up to the starrs above (her voice thrilled deeply with the passion of the tropical and amorous night)

And sang to a small (little pause) guitarr…’ ”

“Mummy, what’s a guit …?”

“Hush, pet, hush.” She could almost feel the child’s questioning spirit oozing out between her confining fingers.

With a green flash of emeralds, a many-coloured glitter of brilliants, Mrs Escobar laid her long white hand on her heart and raised her eyes towards imaginary constellations.

“ ‘Oh lovely poosseh, oh poosseh my love,

What a (from high, the voice dropped emphatically) beautiful poosseh you are, you are,

What a beautiful poosseh you are!’ ”

“But, mummy, do owls like cats?”

“Don’t talk, darling.”

“But you told me cats eat birds.”

“Not this cat, my pet.”

“But you said so, mummy …”

Mrs Escobar began the next stanza.

“ ‘Said the cut to the aul, You elegant faul,

How charrmingly sweet you sing (Mrs Escobar’s voice became languishing).

Come, let us be murried; too long have we turried.

But what (pause; Mrs Escobar made a despairing gesture, luminous with rings) shall we do (pause) for the (her voice rose to the question) rring, the rring?

But what shall we do for the rring?

“ ‘ So they sailed away for a yeerr and a day

To the lund where the bong-tree grows… .’ ”

“What’s a bongtrygroze, mummy?”

Mrs Escobar slightly raised her voice so as to cover the childish interruption and went on with her recitation.

“ ‘ And there (pause) in a wood (pause) a Pig-gywig stood, With a rring… .’ ”

‘But, mummy …”

“ ‘With a rring (Mrs Escobar repeated still more loudly, describing in the air, as she did so, a flashing circle) at the end of his nose, his nose… .’ ”

“Mummy!” The child was furious with impatience; he shook his mother’s arm. “Why don’t you say? What is a bongtrygroze?”

“You must wait, my pet.’

Susan put her finger to her lips. “Sh-sh!” Oh, how she wished that he would be good! What would Mrs Escobar think? And her reading was so beautiful.

“ ‘With a rring (Mrs Escobar described a still larger circle) at the end of his nose’ ”

“It’s a kind of tree,” whispered Ruth.

“ ‘Deerr peeg, arre you willing to sell for one shilling

Your rring? Said the Peeggy, I will.

So they took it a-way and were murried next day

By the turrkey who lives on the hill (the dreamy note in Mrs Escobar’s voice made the turkey’s hill sound wonderfully blue, romantic and remote),

By the turrkey who lived on the hill.

“ ‘They dined on mince and slices of quince,

Which they ate with a runcible spoon,

And …’”

“What’s runcible?”

“Hush, darling.”

“ ‘… hand in hand (the voice became cooingly tender, bloomy like a peach with velvety sentiment) by the edge …’”

“But why do you say sh-sh, like that?” the little boy shouted. He was so angry, that he began to hit his mother with his fists.

The interruption was so scandalous, that Mrs Escobar was forced to take notice of it. She contented herself with frowning aind laying her finger on her lips.

“ ‘… by the edge of the sand (all the ocean was in Mrs Escobar’s voice),

They danced (how gay and yet how exquisitely, how nuptially tender!) by the light (she spoke very slowly; she allowed her hand, which she had lifted, to come gradually down, like a tired bird, on to her knee) of the moo-oon.’ ”

If any one could have heard those final words, he would have heard interstellar space, and the mystery of planetary motion, and Don Juan’s serenade, and Juliet’s balcony. If any one could have heard them. But the scream which Baby uttered was so piercingly loud, that they were quite inaudible.

III

“I think you ought to talk to Ruth seriously one day,” said Mrs Escobar, on the way back from Purlieu Villas, “about Baby. I don’t think she really brings him up at all well. He’s spoiled.”

The accusation was couched in general terms. But Susan began at once to apologize for what she felt sure was Baby’s particular offence.

“Of course,” she said, “the trouble was that there were so many words in the poem he didn’t understand.”

Mrs Escobar was annoyed at having been too well understood.

“The poem?” she repeated, as though she didn’t understand what Susan was talking about. “Oh, I didn’t mean that. I thought he was so good, considering, while I was reading. Didn’t you?”

Susan blushed, guiltily. “I thought he interrupted rather a lot,” she said.

Mrs Escobar laughed indulgently. “But what can you expect of a little child like that?” she said. “No, no; I was thinking of his behaviour in general. At tea, for example… . You really ought to talk to Ruth about it.”

Susan promised that she would.

Changing the subject, Mrs Escobar began to talk about Sydney Fell, who was coming to dinner that evening. Such a darling creature! She liked him more and more. He had a most beautiful mouth; so refined and sensitive, and yet at the same time so strong, so sensual. And he was so witty and such an accomplished amorist. Susan listened in misery and silence.

“Don’t you think so?” Mrs Escobar kept asking insistently. “Don’t you think he’s delightful?”

Susan suddenly burst out. “I hate him,” she said, and began to cry.

“You hate him?” said Mrs Escobar. “But why? Why? You’re not jealous, are you?” She laughed.

Susan shook her head,

“You are!” Mrs Escobar insisted. “You are!”

Susan continued obstinately to shake her head. But Mrs Escobar knew that she had got her revenge.

“You silly, silly child,” she said in a voice in which there were treasures of affection. She put her arm round the girl’s shoulders, drew her gently and tenderly towards her and began to kiss her wet face. Susan abandoned herself to her happiness.