

WHITE LOVES

BY JAMES HOPPER

ILLUSTRATIONS *By* WILLIAM OBERHARDT

WHEN does a man really begin to love?" some one interrupted.

"God knows," answered Ward.

But Lafarge said, gazing deep into the fire: "You know very well, all of you, that love begins with life.

"Just as we will rehearse war with a wooden gun and maternity with a rag doll, so do we rehearse, while we are small, with cool sweet loves the acrid passions to come.

"These infant loves take as large a place in our childhood as do, in our manhood, what we call our big loves. The difference between them is one of color. These are in pale shimmerings and silvers, in roses and light-blues, to the others' reds, black-and-yellows and imperial purples. Also, they are silent and wistful, and about them there trembles a haze of subtle melancholies, of non-fulfillments and regrets.

"I will tell you about mine. I am not afraid."

Claire was the name of my first love. I was five years old, and bore even then within me the vague memory of at least one other affair — of being in a garden, beneath a tree, and watching through a hedge a small maid who also watched me. We stood there long in the hot silence; the sun, leaf-filtered, trickled upon her in yellow rain; and we peered at each other through lucent green tunnels, our eyes round and our lips tight with an external hostility that strove to hide the sweet turmoil within our little hearts.

But Claire I remember clearly. I was going to a small private school chosen by an over-fond mother, and Claire once a day came down from some mysterious upper class, and heard my spelling-lesson. She was lithe and delicate, and her hair of the lightest, lightest gold, light not only of hue but of texture, so that it was less hair than a glow, an emanence of her soul. I don't know how old she was. An assemblage of stern facts force me to the conclusion that she could not have been more than ten. But to me, then, she was Woman itself



"If I had spoken to her, she would not have died"

— woman in all that the word holds of gracious and tender, and discreetly helpful, and adorably severe.

Each morning, exactly at ten, we got up, my brother John and I, from our desks, and tip-toed

into the cool, pearl-gray parlor, taking a place stiffly, side by side, in a corner. After a moment, she would come flowing toward us, her hair an aureole. She stood before us, a blue-bound book in hand, her fine little face inclined slightly toward us in a maternal movement which made the curls tremble like leaves about her ears. She opened the book, looked into it; and then, as if having coaxed from it a secret, closed it again on her detaining finger, gazed down upon us in gentle interrogation, and said "rat," or "cat," while we, elbow to elbow, looked up at her with round, fixed and troubled eyes.



My next love was Lily

From the intimacy of this little gray room I issued each time as from a chapel. The rest of the day did not matter — it was a mere muddle of incomprehensible tasks hopelessly besmudged. Within me there dwelled the twilight and the incense of that moment; and across my vision, upon stained gothic glass, Claire's fragile and clear silhouette.

I knew my lesson every day. Each word was a bead, to be laid perfect and flawless at her feet. But my brother John, probably because lacking my secret incentive, spelled badly. And one morning, as he had floundered and I had starved, she stood a while silent and pensive. Her eyes went from me to the other in impartial questioning, and she said: "How is it that John does not know his lesson, while Harry does know his lesson?"

My heart bounded within me. Here was a real communication; freighted with a significance absent in all the "cats" and "rats" in the world. I stepped forward boldly. "T is perhaps," I offered, "because John studies in the evening, while I study mine in the morning."

Between her brows came the pleats of a small frown. She shook her head gently; her curls swung as if they had been cherries about her ears. And her eyes were now upon Brother John, and I felt suddenly very much alone. "But people say," she objected severely, "that if one studies in the evening, one remembers better; it becomes printed upon the mind while you sleep."

There was not much to answer to this. Besides, her glance was altogether upon Brother John. She smiled. "You bad boy!" she said — to Brother John.

I can not describe the manner of that "bad boy." I know now that there was in it at once a maternal reproach, a solicitude and an indulgence; that there lurked beneath, hidden but distinct as the tinkle of a moss-enveloped brook, a discreet amusement; and then, something else, the dawning of an interest, subtle and chuckling and tender. But then, unanalysed, it merely created in me a great hunger; immediately, I fastened upon it as something infinitely desirable, which I must have, which must be mine — and yet was not mine, not mine at all, but Brother John's.

I never did get it; never was it mine. Day followed after day, and Brother John floundered; and wistful with an envy so sad it was not an envy, I saw him in the gentle rain of her scolding, within the



That left me far below

sweet intimacy of her admonition — whilst I, just a step away, felt desolate, miles removed, lone as if four walls of masonry, with just a little hole for breath, as I stood had been raised about me.

My next love was Lily. I do not remember just how the one ended and the other one began. This is true of all my childhood loves. Each simply flows smoothly, insensibly and without shock, into another. For just as these small loves are rehearsals for future passions, just so do we rehearse in them, by an innocent fickleness, the larger infidelities to come.

If Claire was spun gold and sun, Lily was the purple night. I recall her as a flower, as a wild iris, slight and violet, in the half-dusk of a glade.

For days I had seen her, I think, vaguely, a subtle appearance behind the clear splendor of Claire. Then for a time she disappeared, and when again we saw her, she was clothed all in black; we heard that her mother had died.

I can't tell you how immediately, then, all my reveries seized upon her. As a small theme taken by some musician of genius and transmuted into a troubling harmony, so was she, by this touch of Death, enriched to me with wondrous undertones. She was mystery, she was woe, hers the dusky beauty of bereavement. I spied upon her; I fed upon the pallor of her cheeks, the trembling of her lips, the sweet gravity of her gestures. I had visions, one vision especially: I saw her following, alone, an immense funeral chariot bearing her dead mother, while I, from a balcony, wept with intolerable compassion. She was everything to me that was incomparably tragic and — enviable.

Enviably, just that. My spiritual unrest took this form: that she was infinitely admirable, high above

me on a pinnacle that left me far below, unutterably alone; and I began to dream of a restored equality, of events which might raise me to her sublime heights, by her side, hand in hand. I imagined family — a catastrophe. In justice to myself, I must say that the wildest of my sacrilegious fantasies never wandered as far as to touch my mother. But my father — dear old man — how little did he guess when he took me up on his knees at night, how thoroughly in the heart of his son he lay sacrificed to the success of this sable passion.

My dreams happily had no potency; never did reach her heights. When next I remember, I am in love with Madeleine.

She was a blue-eyed, soft, round little thing, a bit stolid with a presage of future maternities. We played on the same hill of the same park, after school, each his or her own game on his or her own side; then, at intervals, rallied headquarters, and while our keepers chatted, stared at each other long and silently. One afternoon, my camp started away earlier than usual, leaving Madeleine and her governess in their accustomed place at the top of the mound. As we went down we came to a spot where worn grass bared a steep, sandy and inviting descent. With a sudden impulse, I hurled myself down in a clownish slide.

Even as I swooped, I heard Madeleine laugh. She was above, invisible to me; the peal came down as from a lark in the sky; it had a penetrating and exquisite quality. It had ended when I reached the level. I loitered, bashful, a moment, a nostalgia at my heart; and then, resolutely, I climbed back and repeated the act that called forth so precious a manifestation.

But this time she did not laugh;



High above me on a pinnacle