

# FOUR GENERATIONS

BY RUTH SUCKOW

“**M**OVE just a little closer together—the little girl more toward the centre—that’s good. Now I think we’ll get it.”

The photographer dived once more under the black cloth.

“Stand back, ma,” a husky voice said. “You’ll be in the picture.”

Aunt Em stepped hastily back with a panicky look. Mercy, she didn’t want to show! She hadn’t had time to get her dress changed yet, had come right out of the kitchen where she was baking pies to see the photograph taken. She was in her old dark blue kitchen dress and had her hair just wadded up until she could get time to comb it. It didn’t give her much time for dressing up, having all this crowd to cook for.

The boys, and Uncle Chris, standing away back on the edges, grinned appreciatively. Fred whispered to Clarence, “Laugh if ma’d got in it.” The way she had jumped back, and her unconsciousness of the ends sticking up from her little wad of hair delighted the boys. When they looked at each other, a little remembering glint came into their eyes.

There was quite a crowd of onlookers. Aunt Em. Uncle Chris in his good trousers, and his shirt sleeves, his sunburned face dark brown above the white collar that Aunt Em had made him put on because of Charlie’s. Uncle Gus and Aunt Sophie Spfierschlage had come over to dinner, and stood back against the white house wall, Aunt Sophie mountainous in her checked gingham. The boys, of course, and Bernie Schultdt who was working for Chris; and another fellow who had come to look at

some hogs and who was standing there, conscious of his old overalls and torn straw hat, mumbling, “Well, didn’t know I was gona find anything like this goin’ on.” . . . Charlie’s wife, Ella, had been given a chair where she could have a good view of the proceedings. She tried to smile and wave her handkerchief when little Phyllis looked around at her. Then she put the handkerchief to her eyes, lifting up her glasses with their narrow light shell rims, still smiling a little painfully. She had to think from how far Katherine had come. . . .

Aunt Em and Aunt Sophie were whispering, “Aint it a shame Edna couldn’t get over! They coulda took one of Chris and her and Marine and Merle, with Grandpa, too. . . . That little one looks awful cute, don’t she? . . . Well, what takes him so long? Grandpa won’t sit there much longer. I should think they coulda had it taken by this time a’ready.”

They all watched the group on the lawn. They had decided that the snowball bushes would “make a nice background.” The blossoms were gone, but the leaves were dark green, and thick. What a day for taking a picture! It would be so much better out here than in the house. Katherine had made them take it right after dinner, so that little Phyllis would not be late for her nap—nothing must ever interfere with that child’s nap. It was the brightest, hottest time of day. The tall orange summer lilies seemed to open and shimmer in the heat. Things were so green—the country lawn with its thick grass, the heavy foliage of the maple trees against the blue summery sky of July. The thin varnished supports of the camera stand glittered yellow and

sticky. The black cloth of the lens looked thick, dense, hot. The photographer's shirt was dazzling white in the sun, and when he drew his head out from under the cloth his round face shone pink. His coat made a black splotch tossed on the grass.

"The little girl more toward the centre."

All three of the others tried anxiously to make little Phyllis more conspicuous. "Here, we've got to have you showing—my, my!—whether the rest of us do or not," Charlie said jovially. Grandpa's small aged frail hand moved a little as if he were going to draw the child in front of him—but, with a kind of delicacy, did not quite touch her little arm.

They had to wait while a little fleecy cloud crossed the sun, putting a brief strange cool shadow over the vivid lawn. In that moment the onlookers were aware of the waiting group. Four generations! Great-grandfather, grandfather, mother, daughter. It was all the more impressive when they thought of Katherine and Phyllis having come from so many miles away. The snowball bushes were densely green behind them—almost dusky in the heat. Grandpa's chair had been placed out there—a homemade chair of willow branches. To think that these four belonged together!

Grandpa, sitting in the chair, might have belonged to another world. Small, bent like a little old troll, foreign with his black cambric skull cap, his blue far-apart peasant eyes with their still gaze, his thin silvery beard. His hands, gnarled from years of farm work in a new country, clasped the homemade knotted stick that he held between his knees. His feet, in old felt slippers with little tufted wool flowers, were set flat on the ground. He wore the checked shirt of an old farmer. . . . It hardly seemed that Charlie was his son. Plump and soft, dressed in the easy garments, of good quality and yet a trifle careless, of middlewestern small town prosperity. His shaven face, paler now than it used to be and showing his age in the folds that had come about his chin; his glasses with shell rims and gold bows; the few

strands of grayish hair brushed across his pale luminous skull. A small town banker. Now he looked both impressed and shame-faced at having the photograph taken. . . . And then Katherine, taking after no one knew whom. Slender, a little haggard and worn, still young, her pale delicate face and the cords in her long soft throat, her little collar bones, her dark intelligent weak eyes behind her thick black-rimmed glasses. Katherine had always been like that. Refined, "finicky," studious, thoughtful. Her hand, slender and a trifle fallow, lay on Phyllis' shoulder.

Phyllis . . . Her little yellow frock made her vivid as a canary bird against the dark green of the foliage. Yellow—the relatives did not know whether they liked that, bright yellow. Still, she did look sweet. They hadn't thought Katherine's girl would be so pretty. Of course the care that Katherine took of her—everything had to revolve around that child. There was something faintly exotic about her liquid brown eyes with their jet-black lashes, the shining straight gold-brown hair, the thick bangs that lay, parted a little and damp with the heat, on the pure white of her forehead. Her little precise "Eastern accent" . . . Grandpa looked wonderingly at the bare arms, round and soft and tiny, white and moist in the heat. Fragile blue veins made a flower-like tracery of indescribable purity on the white skin. Soft, tender, exquisite . . . ach, what a little girl was here, like a princess!

The cloud passed. Katherine's white and Phyllis' yellow shone out again from the green. The others stood back watching, a heavy stolid country group against the white wall of the farm house that showed bright against the farther green of the grove. Beyond lay the orchard and the rank green spreading corn fields where little silvery clouds of gnats went shimmering over the moist richness of the leaves.

"Watch—he's taking it now!"

In the breathless silence they could hear the long whirr and rush of a car on the brown country road beyond the grove.

## II

Well, the picture was taken. Every one was glad to be released from the strain.

Grandpa's chair had been placed nearer the house, under some maple trees. Charlie stayed out there with him a while. It was his duty, he felt, to talk to the old man a while when he was here at the farm. He didn't get over very often—well, it was a hundred miles from Rock River, and the roads weren't very good up here in Sac township. His car stood out at the edge of the grove in the shade. The new closed car that he had lately bought, a "coach," opulent, shining, with its glass and upholstery and old-blue drapes, there against the background of the evergreen grove with its fallen branches and pieces of discarded farm machinery half visible in the deepest shade.

It wasn't really very hard to get away from Rock River and the bank. He and Ella took plenty of trips. He ought to come to see his father more than he did. But he seemed to have nothing to say to Grandpa. The old man had scarcely been off the place for years.

"Well, pa, you keep pretty well, do you?"

"Ja, pretty goot . . . ja, for so old as I am—"

"Oh now, you mustn't think of yourself as so old."

Charlie yawned, re-crossed his legs. He lighted a cigar.

"Chris's corn doing pretty well this season?"

"Ach, dot I know nuttings about. Dey don't tell me nuttings."

"Well, you've had your day at farming, pa."

"Ja . . . ja, ja . . ."

He fumbled in the pocket of his coat, drew out an ancient black pipe.

Charlie said cheerfully, "Have some tobacco?" He held out a can.

The old man peered into it, sniffed. "Ach, dot stuff? No, no, dot is shust like shavings. I smoke de real old tobacco."

"Like it strong, hey?"

They both puffed away.

Grandpa sat in the old willow chair. His blue eyes had a look half wistful, half resentful. Charlie was his oldest child. He would have liked to talk with Charlie. He was always wishing that Charlie would come, always planning how he would tell him things—about how the old ways were going and how the farmers did now, how none of them told him things—but when Charlie came, then that car was always standing there ready to take him right back home again, and there seemed nothing to be said. He always remembered Charlie as the young man, the little boy who used to work beside him in the field—and then when Charlie came, he was this stranger. Charlie was a town man now. He owned a bank! He had forgotten all about the country, and the old German ways. To think of Charlie, their son, being a rich banker, smoking cigars, riding around in a fine carriage with glass windows . . .

"Dot's a fine wagon you got dere."

Charlie laughed. "That's a coach, pa."

"So? Coach, is dot what you call it? Like de old kings, like de emperors, de Kaisers, rode around in. Ja, you can live in dot. Got windows and doors, curtains—is dere a table too, stove—no? Ja, dot's a little house on wheels."

He pursed out his lips comically. But ach, such a carriage! He could remember when he was glad enough to get to town in a lumber wagon. Grandma and the children used to sit in the back on the grain sacks. His old hands felt of the smooth knots of his stick. He went back, back, into revery. . . . He muttered just above his breath, "Ach, ja, ja, ja . . . dot was all so long ago. . . ."

Charlie was silent too. He looked at the car, half drew out his watch, put it back. . . . Katherine crossed the lawn. His eyes followed her. Bluish-gray, a little faded behind his modern glasses—there was resentment, bewilderment, wistfulness in them at the same time, and loneliness. He was thinking of how he used to bring

Kittie out here to the farm when she was a little girl, when Chris used to drive to Germantown and get them with a team and two-seated buggy. They had come oftener than now when they had the car . . . "Papa, *really* did you live out here—on this farm?" He had been both proud and a little jealous because she wasn't sunburned and wiry, like Chris' children. A little slim, long-legged, soft-skinned, dark-eyed girl. "Finicky" about what she ate and what she did—he guessed he and Ella had encouraged her in that. Well, he hadn't had much when he was a child, and he'd wanted his little girl to have the things he'd missed. He'd wanted her to have more than his brothers' and sisters' children. He was Charlie, the one who lived in town, the successful one. Music lessons, drawing lessons, college . . . and here she had grown away from her father and mother. Chris' children lived close around him, but it sometimes seemed to him that he and Ella had lost Kittie. Living away off there in the East. And when she came home, although she was carefully kind and dutiful and affectionate, there was something aloof. He thought jealously, maybe it would have been better if they hadn't given her all those things, had kept her right at home with them. . . . It hadn't been as much pleasure as he had anticipated having his little grandchild there. There was her "schedule" that Kittie was so persnickerty about. He'd been proud to have people in Rock River see her beauty and perfection, but he hadn't been able to take her around and show her off as he'd hoped.

All day he had been seeing a little slim fastidious girl in a white dress and white hair ribbons and black patent leather slippers, clinging to his hand with little soft fingers when he took her out to see the cows and the pigs . . . "Well, Kittie, do you wish we lived out here instead of in town?" She shook her head, and her small under lip curled just a little . . .

He saw Chris and Gus off near the house. They could talk about how crops were

coming, and he could tell them, with a banker's authority, about business conditions. He stirred uneasily, got up, yawned, stretched up his arms, said with a little touch of shame:

"Well, pa, guess I'll go over and talk to Chris a while. I'll see you again before we leave."

"Ja—" The old man did not try to keep him. He watched Charlie's plump figure cross the grass. Ja, he had more to say to the young ones . . .

### III

Aunt Em was through baking. She had gone into the bedroom to "get cleaned up." She had brought out chairs to the front porch. "Sit out here. Here's a chair, Ella—here, Katherine. Ach, Sophie, take a better chair than that." "Naw, this un'll do for me, Em."

"The womenfolks"—Katherine shuddered away from that phrase. She had always, ever since she was a little girl, despised sitting about this way with "the womenfolks." Planted squat in their chairs, rocking, yawning, telling over and over about births and deaths and funerals and sicknesses. There was a kind of feminine grossness about it that offended what had always been called her "finickiness."

Her mother enjoyed it. She was different from Aunt Em and Aunt Sophie, lived in a different way—a small plump elderly woman with waved grayish-silvery hair and a flowered voile dress with little fussy laces, feminine strapped slippers. But still there was something that she liked about sitting here in the drowsy heat and going over and over things with the other women. Sometimes, to Katherine's suffering disgust, she would add items about the birth of Katherine herself—"Well, I thought sure Kittie was going to be a boy. She kicked so hard—" "Oh, *mother*, spare us!" Aunt Em would give a fat comfortable laugh—"Don't look so rambunctious now, does she? Kittie, aint you ever gona get a little flesh on your bones? You study

too hard. She oughta get out and ride the horses around like Edna does."

Aunt Sophie Spfierschlage—that was the way she sat rocking, her feet flat on the floor, her stomach comfortably billowing, beads of sweat on her heavy chin and lips and around the roots of her stiff dull hair. Well, thank goodness she was only Aunt Em's sister, she wasn't really related to the Kleins. Aunt Em was bad enough.

They used to laugh over her fastidious disgust, when she sat here, a delicate critical little girl who didn't want to get on one of the horses or jump from rafters into the hay. "Kittie thinks that's terrible. Well, Kittie, that's the way things happen." "Ach, she won't be so squeamish when she grows up and has three or four of her own." Now she sat beside them, delicate, still too thin to Aunt Em's amazement. "Aint you got them ribs covered up yet? What's the matter? Don't that man of your's give you enough to eat?"—her soft skin pale and her eyes dark from the heat, dressed with a kind of fastidious precision, an ultra-refinement. A fragile bar pin holding the soft white silk of her blouse, her fine dark hair drooping about her face. "Well, you aint changed much since you got married!" Aunt Em had said. They expected to admit her now to their freemasonry, to have *her* add interesting items about the birth of Phyllis.

Phyllis—her little darling! As if the exquisite miracle of Phyllis could have anything in common with these things! Katherine suffered just as she had always suffered from even small vulgarities. But she sat courteous and ladylike now, a slight dutiful smile on her lips.

"Where does she get them brown eyes? They aint the color of your's, are they? Turn around and let's have a look at you—no, I thought your's was kinda darker."

Aunt Em had come out now, had squatted down into another chair. "I guess her papa's got the brown eyes."

"Yes, I think she looks a little like Willis."

Ella said almost resentfully, "Well, I don't know whether she takes after Willis' folks or not, but I can't see that she looks one bit like Kittie or any of us."

"Well," Aunt Em said, "but look at Kittie. She don't look like you or Charlie neither. But I guess she's your's just the same, aint she, Ella? . . . Say, you remember that Will Fuchs? Ja, his girl's got one they say don't belong to who it ought to. Her and that young Bender from over south —"

Katherine did not listen. How long before they could leave? She had thought it right to bring Phyllis over here where her great-grandfather lived, as her father had wished. But it seemed worse to her than ever. She knew that Aunt Em wouldn't let them go without something more to eat, another of her great heavy meals with pie and cake and coffee. Her mother had always said, as if in extenuation of her visible enjoyment of the visit and the food, "Well, Aunt Em means well. Why don't you try and talk with her? She wants to talk with you." But Aunt Em and the Spfierschlages and the whole place seemed utterly alien and horrible to Katherine. For a moment, while they had been taking the photograph out on the lawn, she had felt touched with a sense of beauty. But she had never belonged here. She felt at home in Willis' quiet old frame house in New England, with his precise elderly New England parents—"refinement", "culture", Willis' father reading "the classics", taking the *Atlantic Monthly* ever since their marriage. She had always felt that those were the kind of people she ought to have had, the kind of home. Of course she loved father and mother and was loyal to them. They depended upon her as their only child.

This porch! It seemed to express the whole of her visits to the farm. It was old-fashioned now—a long narrow porch with a fancy railing, the posts trimmed with red. Her ancestral home! It was utterly alien to her.

They were talking to her again.



"Where's the girl—in taking her nap yet?"

"Yes, she's sleeping."

"Ach, you hadn't ought to make her sleep all the time when she's off visiting. I baked a little piece of pie crust for her. I thought I'd give it to her while it was nice and warm."

"Oh, better not try to give her pie crust," Ella said warningly.

"Ach, that aint gona hurt her—nice homemade pie. Mine always et that."

"Ja, mine did too."

Katherine's lips closed firmly. She couldn't hurry and hurt father and mother—but oh, to get Phyllis home! Father—he was always trying to give the child something she shouldn't have, he wanted to spoil her as he had tried to spoil Katherine herself . . . She shut her lips tight to steel herself against the pitifulness of the sudden vision of father—getting so much older these last few years—looking like a child bereft of his toy when she had firmly taken away the things with which he had come trotting happily home for his grandchild. He had gradually drawn farther and farther away. Once he had hurt her by saying significantly, when Phyllis had wanted a pink blotter in the bank—"You'll have to ask your mother. Maybe there's something in it to hurt you. *Grandpa* don't know." He had wanted to take Phyllis to a little cheap circus that had come to town, to show her off and exhibit her. Mother was more sympathetic, even a little proud of retailing to the other "ladies" how careful Katherine was in bringing up the child, what a "nice family" Willis had. But even she was plaintive and didn't understand. Both she and Father thought that Katherine and Willis were "carrying it too far" when they decided to have Willis teach the child until they could find the proper school for her.

She heard a little sleepy startled voice from within the house—"Moth-uh!"

"Uh—huh! There's somebody!" Aunt Em exclaimed delightedly.

Katherine hurried into the darkened

bedroom where Phyllis lay on Aunt Em's best bed spread. The shades were down, but there was the feeling of the hot sunlight back of them. Phyllis' bare arms and legs were white and dewy. Her damp golden-brown bangs were pushed aside. Katherine knelt adoring. She began to whisper.

"Is mother's darling awake? . . . Shall we go home soon—see father? Sleep in her own little room?" . . . Her throat tightened with a homesick vision of the little room with the white bed and the yellow curtains . . .

#### IV

They had left Grandpa alone again. Charlie and the other men were standing out beside the car, bending down and examining it, feeling of the tires, trying the handles of the doors.

Grandpa had left his chair in the yard and gone to the old wooden rocker that stood just inside the door of his room. His room was part of the old house, the one that he and Grandma had had here on the farm. It opened out upon the back yard, with a little worn narrow plank out from the door. It looked out upon the mound of the old cyclone cellar, with its wooden door, where now Aunt Em kept her vegetables in sacks on the damp cool floor, with moist earthen jars of plum and apple butter on the shelf against the cobwebbed wall. The little triangular chicken houses were scattered about in the back yard, and beyond them was the orchard where now small apples were only a little lighter than the vivid summer green of the heavy foliage and where little dark shiny bubbles of aromatic sap had oozed out from the rough crusty bark.

The shadows in the orchard were drawing out long toward the East, and the aisles of sunlight too looked longer. The groups of people moved about more. Everything had the freshened look of late afternoon.

Grandpa rocked a little. He puffed on his pipe, took it out and held it between

his fingers. It left his lower lip moistened and shining above the fringe of silvery beard. His blue eyes kept looking toward the orchard, in a still fathomless gaze. His lips moved at times.

"Ach, ja, ja, ja . . ." A kind of mild sighing groan. It had pleased him that they had wanted the photograph taken, with the little great-grandchild. But that was over now. They had left him alone. And again, with a movement of his head, "Ja, dot was all so long ago."

Beyond the orchard, beyond the dark green corn fields that lay behind it, beyond the river and the town . . . beyond all the wide western country, and the ocean . . . what were his fixed blue eyes, intent and inward and sad, visioning now?

The rocker was framed in the doorway of his room. Even the odor of the room was foreign. His bed with a patchwork quilt, a little dresser, a chest of drawers. The ancient wall paper had been torn off and the walls calcimined a sky-blue. Against the inner one hung his big silver watch, slowly ticking . . . His eyes blue, and his hair under the little black cap, his beard, were silvery . . . A German text with gaudy flowers hung on a woolen cord above the bed. "Der Herr ist mein Hirte."

He started. "Nun—who is dot?"

He did not know that little Phyllis had been watching him. Standing outside the door, in her bright canary yellow, her beautiful liquid brown eyes solemnly studying him. She was half afraid. She had never seen anything so old as "Great-grandfather". The late afternoon sunlight shimmered in the fine texture of his thin silvery beard. It brought out little frostings and marks and netted lines on his old face in which the eyes were so blue. One hand lay upon his knee. She stared wonderingly at the knots that the knuckles made, the brownish spots, the thick veins, the queer stretched shiny look of the skin between the bones. She looked at his black pipe, his funny little cap, his slippers with the tufted flowers . . .

"Ach, so? You t'ink Grandpa is a funny old

man den? You want to look at him? So?"

He spoke softly. A kind of pleased smiling look came upon his face. He stretched out his hand slowly and cautiously, as if it were a butterfly poised just outside his door. A sudden longing to get this small pretty thing nearer, an ingenuous delight, possessed him now that he was alone with her. He spoke as one speaks to a bird toward which one is carefully edging nearer, afraid that a sudden motion will startle its bright eyes and make it take wing.

"Is dis a little yellow bird? Can it sing a little song?"

A faint smile dawned on the serious parted lips. He nodded at her. She seemed to have come a little closer. He too looked in wonderment, as he had done before, at the shining hair, the fragile blue veins on the white temples, the moist pearly white of the little neck, marveling at her as he would have marveled at some beautiful strange bird that might have alighted a moment on his door step . . .

"Can't sing a little song? No? Den Grandpa will have to sing one to you."

He had been thinking of songs as he sat here, they had been murmuring somewhere in his mind. Old, old songs that he had known long ago in the old country . . . His little visitor stood quite still as his faint quavering voice sounded with a kind of dim sweetness in the sunshine. . . .

*"Du, du, liegst mir im Herzen,  
Du, du, liegst mir im Sinn,  
Du, du, machst mir viel Schmerzen,  
Weist nicht wie gut ich dir bin—  
Ja, ja, ja, ja, weisst nicht wie gut ich dir bin."*

The gaze of her brown shining eyes never wavered, and a soft glow of fascinated interest grew in them as the sad wailing simplicity of the old tune quavered on the summer air. For a moment she was quite near, they understood each other.

"You like dot? Like Grandpa's song?"

She nodded. A tiny pleased smile curved her fresh lips. . . . Then suddenly, with a little delicate scared movement, as if after all she had discovered that the place was strange, she flitted away to her mother.

## HUNEKER ON HUNEKER

To Dr. T. C. Williams.<sup>1</sup>

The Carrollton,  
981 Madison Ave.,  
New York, April 2, 1908.

DEAR TOM: I'm glad you read (or dipped into) "Visionaries", as duly reported by my spouse. The book contains the scrapings of my magazine articles for the past ten years. It does not hang together—but what volume of short stories does? I'm writing to Scribners to send you my "Chopin" and "Iconoclasts". Perhaps you may remark that the first—since translated into German and French—is a real book, not a compilation. It demanded for its execution years of concentrated effort. It is now the standard work for teachers, so I am assured. The study of Ibsen—O joyful whiskers!—was, up to the time of his death, the longest in the English tongue—168 pages. Both of these books will be of value to you in your practise, being warranted to cure, or alleviate, insomnia, varicose veins and the pip. I am going to write that novel, but two other books are on the bridge ahead of it—my Liszt life and a volume of literary essays, due in 1919.

Yours with brittle veins,

JIM.

### II

To Edward Ziegler.<sup>2</sup>

Marienbad, August 26, 1909.

DEAR BILL: We work here like convicts. Get up at 6 with a chorale; go to bed at 8 with a hunger. *Bergsteigen* all day, six hours at a lick. Think of your fat papa walking up narrow paths at an angle of 45 degrees! But the results! I've lost 16 lbs. in 15 days

<sup>1</sup> For many years Huneker's physician and friend.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of this letter, musical critic for the New York *Herald*.

and have only begun. My doctor kicks, but as my nerves are good I sleep well, and he can't stop me. My clothes hang on my bony shoulders, my pretty jowls are gone, and my belly, O Bill, my fat belly has gone, vanished, disappeared! The waters are easy. Between you and me, it's all in the avoidance of liquids at meals—a thing I never found difficult. My gout has disappeared, my uric acid is diminished, and I am about to send to a tailor to have my clothes reefed in. Of course, I'll get 10 lbs. back on the voyage, but—no more beer or potatoes for this gentleman! I feel too spry ever to relapse into obesity again. My waist has shriveled from 45 to 38 and is still dwindling. What joy! I elbow Edward VII every morning and enjoy his huge coarse chuckle. He is a good fellow. So is the King of Greece. So is the Duc d'Orleans, and all the rest of the over-ripe gang down here flushing their insides. I read German every day—but my accent!

As ever,

JIM.

### III

To John Quinn.<sup>3</sup>

Westminster Court,  
1618 Beverly Road,  
Brooklyn, June 4, 1914.

DEAR JOHN: I'm at work on magazine articles—various sorts. The one on Conrad reads fairly well in typescript, but you can't tell until it's in actual type. Have just finished for *Puck* a diatribe against Socialism and a review of the "best" fiction of the day—American. Dreiser leads in seriousness, but he writes clumsily. I think Rupert Hughes is a winner ("What Will People Say?"), and "The Salamander", by

<sup>3</sup> Lawyer, book collector and art connoisseur.