

The Life Of Five Points

By Edna Clare Bryner

From The Dial

A life went on in the town of Five Points. Five Points, the town was called, because it was laid out in the form of a star with five points and these points picked it out and circumscribed it. The Life that was lived there was in this wise. Over the centre of the town it hung thick and heavy, a great mass of tangled strands of all the colours that were ever seen, but stained and murky-looking from something that oozed out no one could tell from which of the entangling cords. In five directions heavy strands came in to the great knot in the centre and from it there floated out, now this way, now that, loose threads like tentacles, seeking to fasten themselves on whatever came within their grasp. All over the town thin threads criss-crossed back and forth in and out among the heavy strands making little snarls wherever several souls lived or were gathered together. One could see, by looking intently, that the tangling knotted strands and threads were woven into the rough pattern of a star.

Life, trembling through the mass in the centre, streamed back and forth over the incoming strands, irregularly and in ever-changing volume, pulling at the smaller knots here and there in constant disturbance. It swayed the loosely woven mass above the schoolhouse, shaking out glints of colour from the thin bright cords, golden yellows and deep blues, vivid reds and greens. It twisted and untwisted the small black knot above the town hotel. It arose in murky vapour from the large knots above each of the churches. All over the town it quivered through the fine entangling threads, making the pattern change in colour, loosening and tightening the weaving. In this fashion Life came forth from the body which it inhabited.

This is the way the town lay underneath it. From a large round of foot-tramped earth five wide streets radiated out in as many directions for a length of eight or ten houses and yards. Then the wide dirt street became a narrow road, the narrow board walks flanking it on either side stopped suddenly and faintly worn paths carried out their line for a space of three minutes' walk when all at once up rose the wall of the forest, the road plunged through and was immediately swallowed up. This is the way it was in all five directions from Five Points.

Round about the town forests lay thick and dark like the dark heavens around the cities of the sky, and held it off secure from every other life-containing place. The roads that pierced the wall of the forest led in deeper and deeper, cutting their way around shaggy foothills down to swift streams and on and up again to heights, in and out of obscure notches. They must finally have sprung out again through another wall of forest to other towns. But as far as Five Points was concerned, they led simply to lumber mills sitting like chained ravening creatures at safe distances from one another eating slowly away at the thick woods as if trying to remove the screen that held the town off to itself.

In the beginning there was no town at all, but miles and miles of virgin forest clothing the earth that humped itself into rough-bosomed hills and hummocks. Then the forest was its own. Birds nested in its dense leafage, fish multiplied in the clear running streams, wild creatures ranged its fastnesses in security. The trees, touched by no harsher hand than that which turns the rhythmically changing seasons, added year by year ring upon ring to their girths.

Suddenly human masters appeared. They looked at the girth of the trees, appraised the wealth that lay hidden there, marked the plan of its taking out. They brought in workers, cleared a space for head-quarters in the midst of their great tracts, cut roads out through the forest, and wherever swift streams crossed they set mills. The cleared space they laid out symmetrically in a tree-fringed centre of common ground encircled by a main street for stores and offices, with streets for

houses leading out to the edge of the clearing. In the south-east corner of the town they set aside a large square of land against the forest for a school-house.

Thus Five Points was made as nearly in the centre of the great uncut region as it could well be and still be on the narrow-gauge railroad already passing through to make junction with larger roads. In short order there was a regular town with a station halfway down the street where the railroad cut through and near it a town hotel with a bar; a post office, several stores, a candy shop and a dentist's office fronting the round of earth in the centre; five churches set each on its own street and as far from the centre of the town as possible; and a six-room school-house with a flagpole. One mile, two miles, five and six miles distant in the forest, saw-mills buzzed away, strangely noisy amid their silent clumsy lumbermen and mill folk.

One after another, all those diverse persons necessary for carrying on the work of a small community drifted in. They cut themselves loose from other communities and hastened hither to help make this new one, each moved by his own particular reason, each bringing to the making of a Life the threads of his own deep desire. The threads interlaced with other threads, twisted into strands, knotted with other strands and the Life formed itself and hung trembling, thick and powerful, over the town.

The mill owners and managers came first, bringing strong warp threads for the Life. They had to have the town to take out their products and bring in supplies. They wanted to make money as fast as possible. "Let the town go to hell!" they said. They cared little how the Life went so that it did go. Most of them lived alternately as heads of families at home two hundred miles away and as bachelors at their mills and extract works.

Mr. Stillman, owner of hundreds of acres of forest, was different. He wanted to be near at hand to watch his timber being taken out slowly

and carefully and meanwhile to bring up his two small sons, healthy and virtuous, far away from city influences. He made a small farm up in the high south-west segment of the town against the woods, with orchards and sheep pasture and beehives and a big white farm-house, solidly built. He became a deacon in the Presbyterian church and one of the corner-stones of the town.

Mr. Goff, owner of mills six miles out, kept up a comfortable place in town to serve as a half-way house between his mills and his home in a city a couple of hundred miles distant. He believed that his appearance as a regular townsman had a steadying influence on his workmen, that it gave them faith in him. His placid middle-aged wife accompanied him back and forth on his weekly visits to the mills and interested herself in those of his workers who had families.

Mill Manager Henderson snapped at the chance to run the Company store as well as to manage several mills. He saw in it something besides food and clothing for his large family of red-haired girls. Although he lived down at one of the mills he was counted as a townsman. He was a pillar in the Methodist church and his eldest daughter played the piano there.

George Brainerd, pudgy chief clerk of the Company store, was hand in glove with Henderson. He loved giving all his energies, undistracted by family or other ties, to the task of making the Company's workers come out at the end of the season in the Company's debt instead of having cleared a few hundred dollars as they were made to believe, on the day they were hired, would be the case. The percentage he received for his cleverness was nothing to him in comparison with the satisfaction he felt in his ability to manipulate.

Lanky Jim Dunn, the station agent, thirty-three and unmarried, satisfied his hunger for new places by coming to Five Points. He hated old settled lines of conduct. As station agent, he had a hand in

everything and on every one that came in and went out of the town. He held a sort of gauge on the Life of the town. He chaffed all the girls who came down to see the evening train come in and tipped off the young men as to what was doing at the town hotel.

Dr. Smelter, thin-lipped and cold-eyed, elegant in manner and in dress, left his former practice without regret. He opened his office in Five Points hoping that in a new community obscure diseases did not flourish. He was certain that lack of skill would not be as apparent there as in a well-established village.

Rev. Trotman had been lured hither by the anticipation of a virgin field for saving souls; Rev. Little, because he dared not let any of his own fold be exposed to the pitfalls of an opposing creed.

Dave Fellows left off setting chain pumps in Gurnersville and renewed his teaching experience by coming to Five Points to be principal of the school. Dick Shelton's wife dragged her large brood of little girls and her drunken husband along after Fellows in order to be sure of some one to bring Dick home from the saloon before he drank up the last penny. It made little difference to her where she earned the family living by washing.

So they came, one after another, and filled up the town--Abe Cohen, the Jew clothing dealer, Barringer, the druggist, Dr. Barton, rival of Dr. Smelter and a far more highly skilled practitioner, Jake O'Flaherty, the saloon-keeper, Widow Stokes, rag carpet weaver and gossip, Jeremy Whitling, town carpenter, and his golden-blond daughter Lucy, school-teacher, Dr. Sohmer, dentist. Every small community needs these various souls. No sooner is the earth scraped clean for a new village than they come, one by one, until the town is complete. So it happened in Five Points until there came to be somewhat fewer than a thousand souls. There the town stood.

Stores and offices completely took up the circle of Main Street and straggled a little down the residence streets. Under the fringe of trees business hummed where side by side flourished Grimes' meat shop, the drug store with the dentist's office above, Henderson's General Store, as the Company store was called, Brinker's grocery store, the Clothing Emporium, McGilroy's barber shop, Backus' hardware, and the post office. The Five Points Argus issued weekly its two pages from the dingy office behind the drug store. Graham's Livery did a big business down near the station.

Each church had gathered its own rightful members within its round of Sunday and mid-week services, its special observances on Christmas, and Easter, and Children's Day. In the spring of each year a one-ring circus encamped for a day on the common ground in the centre of the town and drew all the people in orderly array under its tent. On the Fourth of July the whole town again came together in the centre common, in fashion less orderly, irrespective of creed or money worth, celebrating the deeds of their ancestors by drinking lemonade and setting off firecrackers.

After a while no one could remember when it had been any different. Those who came to town as little children grew into gawky youths knowing no more about other parts of the world than their geography books told them. When any one died, a strand in the Life hanging above the town broke and flapped in the wind, growing more and more frayed with the passing of time, until after a year or so its tatters were noticeable only as a sort of roughness upon the pattern. When a child was born, a thin tentacle from the central mass of strands reached out and fastened itself upon him, dragging out his desire year by year until the strand was thick and strong and woven in securely among the old scaly ones.

The folk who lived at the mills had hardly anything to do with the Life of Five Points. They were merely the dynamo that kept the Life alive. They were busied down in the woods making the money for the men

who made the town. They came to town only on Saturday nights. They bought a flannel shirt and provisions at the Company store, a bag of candy at Andy's for the hotel and then went back to have their weekly orgy in their own familiar surroundings. They had little effect on the Life of the town. That was contained almost entirely within the five points where the road met the forest.

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The Life of Five Points had one fearful enemy. Its home was in the black forest. Without any warning it was likely to break out upon the town, its long red tongues leaping out, striving to lick everything into its red gullet. It was a thirsty animal. If one gave it enough water, it went back into its lair. Five Points had only drilled wells in back yards. The nearest big stream was a mile away.

Twice already during the existence of the Life the enemy had started forth from its lair. The first time was not long after the town had started and the pattern of Life was hardly more than indicated in the loosely woven threads.

Down in the forest the people saw a long red tongue leaping. With brooms and staves they ran to meet it far from their dwellings, beating it with fury. As they felt the heat of its breath in their faces, they thought of ministers' words in past sermons. Young desires and aspirations long dormant began to throb into being. They prayed for safety. They promised to give up their sins. They determined to be hard on themselves in the performance of daily duties. The Life suspended above them untwisted its loosely gathered in strands, the strands shone with a golden light and entwined again in soft forms.

With death-dealing blows they laid the enemy black and broken about Grant's Mills, a mile away, and then went back to their homes telling each other how brave they had been. Pride swelled up their hearts. They boasted that they could take care of themselves. Old habits

slipped back upon their aspirations and crushed them again into hidden corners. Life gathered up its loose-woven pattern of dull threads and hung trembling over the town.

Worsting the enemy brought the people more closely together. Suddenly they seemed to know each other for the first time. They made changes, entered into bonds, drew lines, and settled into their ways. Life grew quickly with its strands woven tightly together into a weaving that would be hard to unloose.

The mill managers made money. They saw to it that their mills buzzed away continually. They visited their homes regularly. Mr. Stillman's farm flourished. His apple trees were bearing. The school children understood that they could always have apples for the asking. The Stillman boys did not go to school. They had a tutor. Their father whipped them soundly when they disobeyed him by going to play in the streets of the town with the other children.

Dave Fellows had finally persuaded Dick Shelton to take a Cure. Dick Shelton sober, it was discovered, was a man of culture and knew, into the bargain, all the points of the law. So he was made Justice of the Peace. His wife stopped taking in washing and spent her days trying to keep the children out of the front room where Dick tried his cases.

Dave Fellows himself gave up the principalship of the school, finding its meagre return insufficient to meet the needs of an increasing family. Yielding to the persuasion of Henderson, he became contractor for taking out timber at Trout Creek Mill. He counted on his two oldest sons to do men's work during the summer when school was not in session. Fellows moved his family into the very house in which Henderson had lived. Henderson explained that he had to live in town to be near a doctor for his ailing wife and sickly girls. The millmen told Dave Fellows that Henderson was afraid of them because they had threatened him if he kept on overcharging them at the Company store.

Abe Cohen did a thriving business in clothing. He had a long list of customers heavily in debt to him through the promise that they could pay whenever they got ready. He dunned them openly on the street so that they made a wide detour in order to avoid going past his store.

Dr. Barton had established a reputation for kindness of heart as well as skill in practice that threatened his rival's good will. Helen Barton, the doctor's young daughter, perversely kept company with her father's rival. Every one felt sorry for the father but secretly admired Dr. Smelter's diabolic tactics.

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Long-forgotten was the enemy when it came the second time. On a dark night when Five Points lay heavy in its slumbers, it bore down upon the north side of the town. Some sensitive sleeper, troubled in his dreams, awoke to see the dreadful red tongues cutting across the darkness like crimson banners. His cries aroused the town. All the fathers rushed out against the enemy. The mothers dressed their children and packed best things in valises ready to flee when there was no longer any hope.

For three days and three nights the enemy raged, leaping in to eat up one house, two houses, beaten back and back, creeping up in another place, beaten back again. The school boys took beaters and screamed at the enemy as they beat.

The older ones remembered the first coming of the enemy. They said, "It was a warning!" They prayed while fear shook their aching arms. The Life of the town writhed and gleams of colour came out of its writhings and a whiteness as if the red tongues were cleansing away impurities.

The mill managers brought their men to fight the enemy. "We mustn't let it go," they said. Mr. Stillman had his two sons helping him. He talked to them while they fought the enemy together. He spoke of punishment for sin. His sons listened while the lust of fighting held their bodies.

Helen Barton knelt at her father's feet where he was fighting the enemy and swore she would never see Dr. Smelter again. She knew he was a bad man and could never bring her happiness.

Lyda, eldest daughter in the Shelton family, gathered her little sisters about her, quieting their clamours while her mother wrung her hands and said over and over again, "To happen when your papa was getting on so nicely!" Lyda resolved that she would put all thoughts of marrying out of her head. She would have to stop keeping company with Ned Backus, the hardware man's son. It was not fair to keep company with a man you did not intend to marry. She would stay for ever with her mother and help care for the children so that her father would have a peaceful home life and not be tempted.

All about, wherever they were, people prayed. They prayed until there was nothing left in their hearts but prayer as there was nothing left in their bodies but a great tiredness.

Then a heavy rain came and the red tongues drank greedily until they were slaked and became little short red flickers of light on a soaked black ground. The enemy was conquered. One street of the town was gone.

People ran to the church and held thanksgiving services. A stillness brooded over the town. Life hardly moved; the strands hung slack. Thanksgiving soon changed to revival. Services lasted a week. The ministers preached terrible sermons, burning with terrible words. "Repent before it is too late. Twice God has warned this town." People vowed vows and sang as they had never sung before the

hymns in their church song-books. The strands of Life leapt and contorted themselves but they could not pull themselves apart.

The revival ended. Building began. In a few months a street of houses sprang up defiant in yellow newness. In and out of a pattern little changed from its old accustomed aspect Life pulsated in great waves over the heavy strands. In and out, up and down, it rushed, drawing threads tightly together, knotting them in fantastic knots that only the judgment day could undo.

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Mr. Stillman's sons were now young men. The younger was dying of heart trouble in a hospital in the city. The father had locked the elder in his room for two weeks on bread and water until he found out exactly what had happened between his son and the Barringers' hired girl. Guy Stillman, full-blooded, dark, and handsome, with high cheek bones like an Indian, declared vehemently that he would never marry the girl.

Dave Fellows had taken his sons out of school to help him the year round in the woods. Sixteen-year-old Lawrence had left home and gone to work in the town barber shop late afternoons and evenings in order to keep on at his work in the high school grades just established. He vowed he would never return home to be made into a lumber-jack. Dave's wife was trying to persuade him to leave Five Points and go to the city where her family lived. There the children could continue their schooling and Dave could get work more suited to his ability than lumbering seemed to be. Dave, too proud to admit that he had not the capacity for carrying on this work successfully, refused to entertain any thought of leaving the place. "If my family would stick by me, everything would come out all right," he always said.

Lyda Shelton still kept company with Ned Backus. When he begged her to marry him, she put him off another year until the children were

a little better able to care for themselves. Her next youngest sister had married a dentist from another town and had not asked her mother to the wedding. Lyda was trying to make it up to her mother in double devotion.

Helen Barton met Dr. Smelter once too often and her father made her marry him. She had a child born dead. Now she was holding clandestine meetings with Mr. Daly, a traveling salesman, home on one of his quarterly visits to his family. He had promised to take Helen away with him on his next trip and make a home for her in the city.

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It was a sweltering hot Saturday in the first part of June. Every now and then the wind blew in from the east picking up the dust in eddies. Abe Cohen's store was closed. His children wandered up and down the street, celebrating their sabbath in best clothes and chastened behaviour. Jim Dunn was watching a large consignment of goods for the Company store being unloaded. He was telling Earl Henderson, the manager's nephew, how much it would cost him to get in with the poker crowd.

George Brainerd had finished fixing up the Company's accounts. He whistled as he worked. Dave Fellows was in debt three hundred dollars to the Company. That would keep him another year. He was a good workman but a poor manager. Sam Kent was in debt one hundred dollars. He would have to stay, too. John Simpson had come out even. He could go if he wanted to. He was a trouble-maker anyway....

Helen Barton sat talking with Daly in the thick woods up back of the Presbyterian church. They were planning how to get away undetected on the evening train.... "If she was good enough for you then, she's good enough now," Mr. Stillman was saying to his defiant son.

"You're not fit for a better woman. You'll take care of her and that's the end of it...."

Widow Stokes' half-witted son rode up from the Extract Works on an old bony horse. He brought word that the enemy was at the Kibbard Mill, two miles beyond the Works. People were throwing their furniture into the mill pond, he said. Every one laughed. Mottie Stokes was always telling big stories. The boy, puzzled, went round and round the town, stopping every one he met, telling his tale. Sweat poured down his pale face.

At last he rode down to Trout Creek Mill and told Dave Fellows. Dave got on the old grey mule and came up to town to find out further news. The townsfolk, loafing under the trees around Main Street and going about on little errands, shouted when they saw Dave come in on his mule beside Mottie on the bony horse. "Two of a kind," was passed round the circle of business and gossip, and sniggering went with it. Dave suggested that some one go down to see just what had happened. Jeers answered him. "Believe a fool? Not quite that cracked yet!" Dave went about uneasily if he had business to attend to, but keeping an eye searching out in the direction of the Works.

In an hour or so another rider came panting into town. Back of him straggled families from the mills and works with whatever belongings they could bring on their backs. Fear came into the hearts of the citizens of Five Points. They shouted in anger to drive away their fear. "Why didn't you stay and fight it? What'd you come up here for?"

"Too big, too big," cried the lumber folk, gesturing back over their shoulders.

Far off a haze was gathering and in the haze a redness appeared, growing slowly more and more distinct. The townsfolk stared in the direction of the Works, unwilling to believe. Some one shouted, "Better be ready!" Shortly every pump in the town had its hand and

everything that could hold water was being filled for the oncoming thirsty beast.

Dave Fellows galloped down the long hills, around curves, across the bridge at the mill and up again to his home, told his family of the approach of the enemy, directed them to pack up all the easily moved furniture, harness the two mules and be ready to flee out through the forest past Goff's Mills to the next station thirty miles further down the railroad. No one could tell where the enemy would spread. He would come back the minute that all hope was lost. The boys must stay at home and take care of the place. "Bring Lawrence back with you," his wife called after him, and he turned and waved his hand.

When he got back into town thousands of red tongues were bearing down upon the station street. The enemy belched forth great hot breaths that swept the sky ahead of it like giant firecrackers and falling upon the houses to the east of the town ran from one to another eating its way up the station street towards the centre of the town. Family after family left their homes, carrying valuables, dragging their small children, and scattered to the north and south of the advancing enemy. The town hotel emptied itself quickly of its temporary family. Jim Dunn left the station carrying the cash box and a bundle of papers.

From building to building the enemy leaped. Before it fled group after group of persons from stores and homes. Methodically it went round the circle of shops, the most rapacious customer the town had ever seen. Quarters of beeves in the meat shop, bottles of liquids and powders on the drug-store shelves, barrels and boxes of food in the grocery store, suits of clothing in Abe Cohen's, the leather whips and carriage robes in the hardware store, all went down its gullet with the most amazing ease.

Swelled with its indiscriminate meal, it started hesitantly on its way up the street that led to the Presbyterian Church. Now people lost their

heads and ran hither and thither, screaming and praying incoherently, dragging their crying children about from one place to another, pumping water frantically to offer it, an impotent libation to an insatiable god. They knew that neither the beating of brooms nor the water from their wells could quench the enemy that was upon them. Red Judgment Day was at hand.

Meanwhile a peculiar thing happened. The Life that was hanging above the town lifted itself up, high up, entire in its pattern, beyond the reach of red tongues, of gusts from hot gullets--and there it stayed while the enemy raged below.

Dave Fellows harangued the men who were beating away vainly, pouring buckets of water on unquenchable tongues. He pointed to the forest up the street back of the Presbyterian Church. He was telling them that the only thing to do was to call forth another enemy to come down and do battle with this one before it reached the church. "Yes, yes," they chorused eagerly.

Craftily they edged around south of the enemy, scorching their faces against its streaming flank, and ran swiftly far up the line of forest past the church. There it was even at that moment that Helen Barton was begging Daly to remember his promise and take her with him on the evening train....

The men scooped up leaves and small twigs and bending over invoked their champion to come forth and do battle for them. Presently it came forth, shooting out little eager red tongues that danced and leaped, glad to be coming forth, growing larger in leaps and bounds. Dave Fellows watched anxiously the direction in which the hissing tongues sprang. "The wind will take it," he said at last. Fitfully the breeze pressed up against the back of the newly born, pushing more and more strongly as the tongues sprang higher and higher, until finally it swept the full-grown monster down the track towards where the other monster was gorging.

"For God's sake, Henry, take me with you, this evening, as you promised," Helen was imploring Daly. "I can't stay here any longer. My father--I wish now I had listened to him in the first place, long ago." Daly did not hear her. He had risen to his feet and holding his head back was drawing in great acrid breaths. His florid face went white. "What is that?" he said hoarsely. Through the thick forest red tongues broke out, sweeping towards them. Helen clutched Daly's arm, screaming. He shook her off and turned to flee out by the church. There, too, red tongues were leaping, curling back on themselves in long derisive snarls. Daly turned upon her. "You ..."

The two enemies met at the church, red tongue leaping against red tongue, crackling jaws breaking on crackling jaws, sizzling gullet straining against sizzling gullet. A great noise like the rending of a thousand fibres, a clap of red thunder, as the body of beast met the body of beast, and both lay crumpled upon the ground together, their long bodies writhing, bruised, red jaws snapping, red tongue eating red tongue.

Upon them leaped the band of men spreading out the whole length of the bodies and beat, beat, incessantly, desperately, tongue after tongue, hour after hour, beat, beat. Lingeringly the enemy died, a hard death. Three days it was dying and it had watchers in plenty. Whenever a red tongue leaped into life, some one was there to lay it low. In the night-time the men watched, and in the day the women and girls. The men talked. "We will build it up again in brick," they said. "That is safer and it looks better, too." The women talked, too. "I hope Abe will get in some of those new lace curtains," they said.

Meanwhile families gathered themselves together. Those whose homes were gone encamped picnic fashion in the schoolhouse or were taken in by those whose houses were still standing. Two persons were missing when the muster of the town was finally taken. They were Helen Barton and Mr. Daly. Jim Dunn said he wasn't sure but he

thought Daly left on the morning train. Daly's wife said he told her he was not going until evening.

They searched for Helen far and wide. No trace of her was ever found. Her father stood in front of the Sunday School on the Sunday following the death of the enemy and made an eloquent appeal for better life in the town. "The wages of sin is death," he declared, "death of the soul always, death of the body sometimes." The people thought him inspired. Widow Stokes whispered to her neighbour, "It's his daughter he's thinking of."

Dave Fellows was the only person who left the town. He went back to his wife when he saw that the town was saved and said, "We might as well move now that we're packed up. The town is cursed." Two days later they took the train north from a pile of blackened timbers where the old station had stood. Lawrence went with them.

The enemy had eaten up all the records in the Company store, and had tried to eat up George Brainerd while he was attempting to save them. The Company had to accept the workers' own accounts. George was going about with his arm tied up, planning to keep a duplicate set of records in a place unassailable by the enemy.

Abe Cohen wailed so about his losses and his little children that Mr. Stillman set him up in a brand new stock of clothing. Abe was telling every one, "Buy now. Pay when you like." And customers came as of old.

Guy Stillman married the Barringers' hired girl. His father established them in a little home out at the edge of the town. The nearest neighbour reported that Guy beat his wife.

Lyda married Ned Backus. "Suppose you had died," she told Ned. "I would never have forgiven myself. You can work in papa's new

grocery store. He's going to start one as soon as we can get the building done. Mama will have a son to help take care of her."

Life, its strands blackened by the strong breath of the enemy, settled down once more over the town and hung there, secure in its pattern, thick and powerful. Under it brick stores and buildings rose up and people stood about talking, complacently planning their days. "It won't come again for a long time," they said.