

THE WORKS OF KATHLEEN NORRIS

SATURDAY'S CHILD

VOLUME IV

"Friday's child is loving and giving; But Saturday's child must work for her living."

To C. G. N.

How shall I give you this, who long
have known Your gift of all the
best of life to me? No living word
of mine could ever be Without the
stirring echo of your own. Under
your hand, as mine, this book has
grown, And you, whose faith sets
all my musing free, You, whose
true vision helps my eyes to
see, Know that these pages are not
mine alone.

Not mine to give, not yours, the

happy days, The happy talks, the
hoping and the fears That made this
story of a happy life. But, in dear
memory of your words of
praise, And grateful memory of
four busy years, Accept her portion
of it, from your wife.

PART ONE

Poverty

SATURDAY'S CHILD

CHAPTER I

Not the place in which to look for the Great Adventure, the dingy, narrow office on the mezzanine floor of Hunter, Baxter & Hunter's great wholesale drug establishment, in San Francisco city, at the beginning of the present century. Nothing could have seemed more monotonous, more grimy, less interesting, to the outsider's eye at least, than life as it presented itself to the twelve women who were

employed in bookkeeping there. Yet, being young, as they all were, each of these girls was an adventuress, in a quiet way, and each one dreamed bright dreams in the dreary place, and waited, as youth must wait, for fortune, or fame, or position, love or power, to evolve itself somehow from the dulness of her days, and give her the key that should open--and shut--the doors of Hunter, Baxter & Hunter's offices to her forever.

And, while they waited, working over the unvaried, stupid columns of the company's books, they talked, confided, became friends, and exchanged shy hints of ambition. The ill-ventilated, neglected room was a little world, and rarely, in a larger world, do women come to know each other as intimately as these women did.

Therefore, on a certain sober September morning, the fact that Miss Thornton, familiarly known as "Thorny," was out of temper, speedily became known to all the little force. Miss Thornton was not only the oldest clerk there, but she was the highest paid, and the longest in the company's employ; also she was by nature a leader, and generally managed to impress her associates with her own mood, whatever it might be. Various uneasy looks were sent to-day in her direction, and by eleven o'clock even the giggling Kirk sisters, who were newcomers, were imbued with a sense of something wrong.

Nobody quite liked to allude to the subject, or ask a direct question. Not that any one of them was particularly considerate or reserved by nature, but because Miss

Thornton was known to be extremely unpleasant when she had any grievance against one of the younger clerks. She could maintain an ugly silence until goaded into speech, but, once launched, few of her juniors escaped humiliation. Ordinarily, however, Miss Thornton was an extremely agreeable woman, shrewd, kindly, sympathetic, and very droll in her passing comments on men and events. She was in her early thirties, handsome, and a not quite natural blonde, her mouth sophisticated, her eyes set in circles of a leaden pallor. An assertive, masterful little woman, born and reared in decent poverty, still Thorny claimed descent from one of the first families of Maryland, and talked a good deal of her birth. Her leading characteristic was a determination never, even in the slightest particular, to allow herself to be imposed upon, and she gloried in stories of her own success in imposing upon other people.

Miss Thornton's desk stood at the inner end of the long room, nearest the door that led out to the "deck," as the girls called the mezzanine floor beyond, and so nearest the little private office of Mr. George Brauer, the arrogant young German who was the superintendent of the Front Office, and heartily detested by every girl therein.

When Miss Thornton wanted to be particularly annoying to her associates she would remark casually that "she and Mr. Brauer" thought this or that, or that "she suggested, and Mr. Brauer quite agreed" as to something else. As a matter of fact, she disliked him as much as they did, although she, and any and every girl there, would really have been immensely pleased and flattered by his admiration, had he

cared to bestow it. But George Brauer's sea-blue eyes never rested for a second upon any Front Office girl with anything but annoyed responsibility. He kept his friendships severely remote from the walls of Hunter, Baxter & Hunter, and was suspected of social ambitions, and of distinguished, even noble connections in the Fatherland.

This morning Miss Thornton and Mr. Brauer had had a conference, as the lady called it, immediately after his arrival at nine o'clock, and Miss Murray, who sat next to Miss Thornton, suspected that it had had something to do with her neighbor's ill-temper. But Miss Thornton, delicately approached, had proved so ungracious and so uncommunicative, that Miss Murray had retired into herself, and attacked her work with unusual briskness.

Next to friendly, insignificant little Miss Murray was Miss Cottle, a large, dark, morose girl, with untidy hair, and untidy clothes, and a bad complexion. Miss Cottle was unapproachable and insolent in her manner, from a sense of superiority. She was connected, she stated frequently, with one of the wealthy families of the city, whose old clothes, the girls suspected, she frequently wore. On Saturday, a half-day, upon which all the girls wore their best clothes to the office, if they had matinee or shopping plans for the afternoon, Miss Cottle often appeared with her frowsy hair bunched under a tawdry velvet hat, covered with once exquisite velvet roses, and her muscular form clad in a gown that had cost its original owner more than this humble relative could earn in a year. Miss Cottle's gloves

were always expensive, and always dirty, and her elaborate silk petticoats were of soiled pale pinks and blues.

Miss Cottle's neighbor was Miss Sherman, a freckled, red-headed, pale little girl, always shabby and pinched-looking, eager, silent, and hard-working. Miss Sherman gave the impression--or would have given it to anyone who cared to study her--of having been intimidated and underfed from birth. She had a keen sense of humor, and, when Susan Brown "got started," as Susan Brown occasionally did, Miss Sherman would laugh so violently, and with such agonized attempts at suppression, that she would almost strangle herself. Nobody guessed that she adored the brilliant Susan, unless Miss Brown herself guessed it. The girls only knew of Miss Sherman that she was the oldest of eight brothers and sisters, and that she gave her mother all her money every Saturday night.

Miss Elsie Kirk came next, in the line of girls that faced the room, and Miss Violet Kirk was next to her sister. The Kirks were pretty, light-headed girls, frivolous, common and noisy. They had a comfortable home, and worked only because they rather liked the excitement of the office, and liked an excuse to come downtown every day. Elsie, the prettier and younger, was often "mean" to her sister, but Violet was always good-natured, and used to smile as she told the girls how Elsie captured her--Violet's--admirers. The Kirks' conversation was all of "cases," "the crowd," "the times of their lives," and "new crushes"; they never pinned on their audacious hats to go home at night without speculating as to possible romantic adventures on the car,

on the street, everywhere. They were not quite approved by the rest of the Front Office staff; their color was not all natural, their clothes were "fussy." Both wore enormous dry "rats," that showed through the thin covering of outer hair, their stockings were quite transparent, and bows of pink and lavender ribbon were visible under their thin shirt-waists. It was known that Elsie had been "spoken to" by old Mr. Baxter, on the subject of a long, loose curl, which had appeared one morning, dangling over her powdered neck. The Kirks, it was felt, never gave an impression of freshness, of soapiness, of starched apparel, and Front Office had a high standard of personal cleanliness. Miss Sherman's ears glowed coldly all morning long, from early ablutions, and her fingertips were always icy, and Miss Thornton and Susan Brown liked to allude casually to their "cold plunges" as a daily occurrence--although neither one ever really took a cold bath, except, perhaps, for a few days in mid-summer. But all of cleanliness is neither embraced nor denied by the taking of cold baths, and the Front Office girls, hours and obligations considered, had nothing on this score of which to be ashamed. Manicuring went on in every quiet moment, and many of the girls spent twenty minutes daily, or twice daily, in the careful adjustment of large sheets of paper as cuffs, to protect their sleeves. Two elastic bands held these cuffs in place, and only long practice made their arrangement possible. This was before the day of elbow sleeves, although Susan Brown always included elbow sleeves in a description of a model garment for office wear, with which she sometimes amused her associates.

"No wet skirts to freeze you to death," Susan would grumble, "no high collar to scratch you! It's time that the office women of America were recognized as a class with a class dress! Short sleeves, loose, baggy trousers--"

A shriek would interrupt her.

"Yes, I SEE you wearing that in the street, Susan!"

"Well, I WOULD. Overshoes," the inventor would pursue, "fleece-lined leggings, coming well up on your--may I allude to limbs, Miss Wrenn?"

"I don't care what you allude to!" Miss Wrenn, the office prude, a little angry at being caught listening to this nonsense, would answer snappily.

"Limbs, then," Susan would proceed graciously, "or, as Miss Sherman says, legs---"

"Oh, Miss Brown! I DIDN'T! I never use that word!" the little woman would protest.

"You don't! Why, you said last night that you were trying to get into the chorus at the Tivoli! You said you had such handsome--"

"Oh, aren't you awful!" Miss Sherman would put her cold red fingers over her ears, and the others, easily amused, would giggle at intervals for the next half hour.

Susan Brown's desk was at the front end of the room,

facing down the double line. At her back was a round window, never opened, and never washed, and so obscured by the great cement scrolls that decorated the facade of the building that it gave only a dull blur of light, ordinarily, and no air at all. Sometimes, on a bright summer's morning, the invading sunlight did manage to work its way in through the dust-coated ornamental masonry, and to fall, for a few moments, in a bright slant, wheeling with motes, across the office floor. But usually the girls depended for light upon the suspended green-hooded electric lights, one over each desk.

Susan thought that she had the most desirable seat in the room, and the other girls carefully concealed from her the fact that they thought so, too. Two years before, a newcomer, she had been given this same desk, but it faced directly against the wall then, and was in the shadow of a dirty, overcrowded letter press. Susan had turned it about, straightened it, pushed the press down the room, against the coat-closet, and now, like all the other girls, she faced the room, could see more than any of them, indeed, and keep an eye on Mr. Brauer, and on the main floor below, visible through the glass inner wall of the office. Miss Brown was neither orderly nor industrious, but she had an eye for proportion, and a fine imagination. She loved small, fussy tasks, docketed and ruled the contents of her desk scrupulously, and lettered trim labels for boxes and drawers, but she was a lazy young creature when regular work was to be done, much given to idle and discontented dreams.

At this time she was not quite twenty-one, and felt herself to be distressingly advanced in years. Like all except a few very fortunate girls of her age, Susan was brimming with perverted energy--she could have done a thousand things well and joyously, could have used to the utmost the exceptional powers of her body and soul, but, handicapped by the ideals of her sex, and lacking the rare guidance that might have saved her, she was drifting, busy with work she detested, or equally unsatisfied in idleness, sometimes lazily diverted and soothed by the passing hour, and sometimes stung to her very soul by longings and ambitions.

"She is no older than I am--she works no harder than I do!" Susan would reflect, studying the life of some writer or actress with bitter envy. But how to get out of this groove, and into another, how to work and fight and climb, she did not know, and nobody ever helped her to discover.

There was no future for her, or for any girl here, that she knew. Miss Thornton, after twelve years of work, was being paid forty-five dollars, Miss Wrenn, after eight years, forty, and Susan only thirty dollars a month. Brooding over these things, Susan would let her work accumulate, and endure, in heavy silence, the kindly, curious speculations and comments of her associates.

But perhaps a hot lunch or a friendly word would send her spirits suddenly up again, Susan would forget her vague ambitions, and reflect cheerfully that it was already four o'clock, that she was going with Cousin Mary Lou and

Billy Oliver to the Orpheum to-night, that her best white shirtwaist ought by this time to have come back from the laundry.

Or somehow, if depression continued, she would shut her desk, in mid-afternoon, and leave Front Office, cross the long deck--which was a sort of sample room for rubber goods, and was lined with long cases of them--descend a flight of stairs to the main floor, cross it and remount the stairs on the other side of the building, and enter the mail-order department. This was an immense room, where fifty men and a few girls were busy at long desks, the air was filled with the hum of typewriters and the murmur of low voices. Beyond it was a door that gave upon more stairs, and at the top of them a small bare room known as the lunch-room. Here was a great locker, still marked with the labels that had shown where senna leaves and tansy and hepatica had been kept in some earlier stage of Hunter, Baxter & Hunter's existence, and now filled with the girls' lunch-boxes, and rubber overshoes, and hair-brushes. There was a small gas-stove in this room, and a long table with benches built about it. A door gave upon a high strip of flat roof, and beyond a pebbled stretch of tar were the dressings-rooms, where there were wash-stands, and soap, and limp towels on rollers.

Here Susan would wash her hands and face, and comb her bright thick hair, and straighten belt and collar. There were always girls here: a late-comer eating her luncheon, two chatter-boxes sharing a bit of powdered chamois-skin at a mirror, a girl who felt ill drinking something hot at the

stove. Here was always company, and gossip, Susan might stop for a half-cup of scalding hot tea, or a chocolate from a striped paper bag. Returning, refreshed and cheered, to the office, she would lay a warm, damp hand over Miss Thornton's, and give her the news.

"Miss Polk and Miss French are just going it up there, Thorny, mad as hops!" or "Miss O'Brien is going to be in Mr. Joe Hunter's office after this."

"S'at so?" Miss Thornton would interestedly return, wrinkling her nose under the glasses she used while she was working. And perhaps after a few moments she would slip away herself for a visit to the lunch-room. Mr. Brauer, watching Front Office through his glass doors, attempted in vain to discourage these excursions. The bolder spirits enjoyed defying him, and the more timid never dared to leave their places in any case. Miss Sherman, haunted by the horror of "losing her job," eyed the independent Miss Brown and Miss Thornton with open awe and admiration, without ever attempting to emulate them.

Next to Susan sat severe, handsome, reserved little Miss Wrenn, who coldly repelled any attempts at friendship, and bitterly hated the office. Except for an occasional satiric comment, or a half-amused correction of someone's grammar, Miss Wrenn rarely spoke.

Miss Cashell was her neighbor, a mysterious, pretty girl, with wicked eyes and a hard face, and a manner so artless, effusive and virtuous as to awaken the basest suspicions

among her associates. Miss Cashell dressed very charmingly, and never expressed an opinion that would not well have become a cloistered nun, but the girls read her colorless face, sensuous mouth, and sly dark eyes aright, and nobody in Front Office "went" with Miss Cashell. Next her was Mrs. Valencia, a harmless little fool of a woman, who held her position merely because her husband had been long in the employ of the Hunter family, and who made more mistakes than all the rest of the staff put together. Susan disliked Mrs. Valencia because of the jokes she told, jokes that the girl did not in all honesty always understand, and because the little widow was suspected of "reporting" various girls now and then to Mr. Hunter.

Finishing the two rows of desks, down opposite Miss Thornton again were Miss Kelly and Miss Garvey, fresh-faced, intelligent Irish girls, simple, merry, and devoted to each other. These two took small part in what did not immediately concern them, but went off to Confession together every Saturday, spent their Sundays together, and laughed and whispered together over their ledgers. Everything about them was artless and pure. Susan, motherless herself, never tired of their talk of home, their mothers, their married sisters, their cousins in convents, their Church picnics and concerts and fairs, and "joshes"--"joshes" were as the breath of life to this innocent pair. "Joshes on Ma," "joshes on Joe and Dan," "joshes on Cecilia and Loretta" filled their conversations.

"And Ma yells up, 'What are you two layin' awake about?'" Miss Garvey would recount, with tears of enjoyment in her

eyes. "But we never said nothing, did we, Gert? Well, about twelve o'clock we heard Leo come in, and he come upstairs, and he let out a yell--'My God!' he says--"

But at the recollection of Leo's discovery of the sheeted form, or the pail of water, or whatever had awaited him at the top of the stairs, Miss Garvey's voice would fail entirely, and Miss Kelly would also lay her head down on her desk, and sob with mirth. It was infectious, everyone else laughed, too.

To-day Susan, perceiving something amiss with Miss Thornton, sauntered the length of the office, and leaned over the older woman's desk. Miss Thornton was scribbling a little list of edibles, her errand boy waiting beside her. Tea and canned tomatoes were bought by the girls every day, to help out the dry lunches they brought from home, and almost every day the collection of dimes and nickels permitted a "wreath-cake" also, a spongy, glazed confection filled with chopped nuts and raisins. The tomatoes, bubbling hot and highly seasoned, were quite as much in demand as was the tea, and sometimes two or three girls made their entire lunch up by enlarging this list with cheese, sausages and fruit.

"Mad about something," asked Susan, when the list for to-day was finished.

Miss Thornton, under "2 wreath" wrote hastily, "Boiling! Tell you later," and turned it about for Susan to read, before she erased it.

"Shall I get that?" she asked, for the benefit of the attentive office.

"Yes, I would," answered her fellow-conspirator, as she turned away.

The hour droned by. Boys came with bills, and went away again. Sudden sharp pangs began to assert themselves in Susan's stomach. An odor of burning rubber drifted up from below, as it always drifted up at about this time. Susan announced that she was starving.

"It's not more than half-past eleven," said Miss Cottle, screwing her body about, so that she could look down through the glass walls of the office to the clock, on the main floor below. "Why, my heavens! It's twelve o'clock!" she announced amazedly, throwing down her pen, and stretching in her chair.

And, in instant confirmation of the fact, a whistle sounded shrilly outside, followed by a dozen more whistles, high and low, constant and intermittent, sharp on the silent noon air. The girls all jumped up, except Miss Wrenn, who liked to assume that the noon hour meant nothing to her, and who often finished a bill or two after the hour struck.

But among the others, ledgers were slammed shut, desk drawers jerked open, lights snapped out. Miss Thornton had disappeared ten minutes before in the direction of the lunch-room; now all the others followed, yawning, cramped, talkative.

They settled noisily about the table, and opened their lunches. A joyous confusion of talk rose above the clinking of spoons and plates, as the heavy cups of steaming tea were passed and the sugar-bowl went the rounds; there was no milk, and no girl at Hunter, Baxter & Hunter's thought lemon in tea anything but a wretched affectation. Girls who had been too pale before gained a sudden burning color, they had been sitting still and were hungry, now they ate too fast. Without exception the Front Office girls suffered from agonies of indigestion, and most of them grew used to a dull headache that came on every afternoon. They kept flat bottles of soda-mint tablets in their desks, and exchanged them hourly. No youthful constitution was proof against the speed with which they disposed of these fresh soft sandwiches at noon-time, and gulped down their tea.

In ten minutes some of them were ready to hurry off into sunny Front Street, there to saunter past warehouses, and warehouses, and warehouses, with lounging men eyeing them from open doorways.

The Kirks disappeared quickly to-day, and some of the others went out, too. When Miss Thornton, Miss Sherman, Miss Cottle and Miss Brown were left, Miss Thornton said suddenly:

"Say, listen, Susan. Listen here--"

Susan, who had been wiping the table carefully, artistically, with a damp rag, was arrested by the tone.

"I think this is the rottenest thing I ever heard, Susan," Miss Thornton began, sitting down at the table. The others all sat down, too, and put their elbows on the table. Susan, flushing uncomfortably, eyed Miss Thornton steadily.

"Brauer called me in this morning," said Miss Thornton, in a low voice, marking the table with the handle of a fork, in parallel lines, "and he asked me if I thought--no, that ain't the way he began. Here's what he said first: he says, 'Miss Thornton,' he says, 'did you know that Miss Wrenn is leaving us?'"

"What!" said all the others together, and Susan added, joyfully, "Gee, that means forty for me, and the crediting."

"Well, now listen," Miss Thornton resumed. "I says, 'Mr. Brauer, Miss Wrenn didn't put herself out to inform me of her plans, but never mind. Although,' I says, 'I taught that girl everything she ever knew of office work, and the day she was here three weeks Mr. Philip Hunter himself came to me and said, 'Miss Thornton, can you make anything of her?' So that if it hadn't been for me--"

"But, Thorny, what's she leaving for?" broke in Susan, with the excited interest that the smallest change invariably brought.

"Her uncle in Milwaukee is going to pay her expenses while she takes a library course, I believe," Miss Thornton said, indifferently. "Anyway, then Brauer asked--now, listen, Susan--he asked if I thought Violet Kirk could do the

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

