

A New Voice

RUTH SUCKOW

*When Ruth Suckow died, in January of 1960, she left portions of an unfinished novel, *Some Boundless Thing*. These portions, which include several starts and revisions, carry the book perhaps no more than a third of its projected length. But there are outlines and notes which sketch the course of the intended story.*

The story is a tragic one, telling of the meteorlike career of a talented young woman, a singer, whose life is cut short by tuberculosis. The heroine, Nanne Cameron, bears resemblance to Ruth Suckow's older sister, Emma. No doubt the projected novel owes a good deal to Ruth's reflections on her sister's life. Yet Nanne's story is different in many ways from that of Emma, and Nanne is very much a character in her own right.

The story deals with profound questions of life and death, love and truth; and it is a great loss that Ruth did not live to finish it. Yet the unfinished manuscript, with its outlines and notes, has much interest in itself. It is to be deposited in the Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Libraries.

The following excerpt is the opening scene in the most fully developed version of the novel. It is a scene Ruth worked over several times and obviously enjoyed for its setting and several important characters, including the first appearance of the heroine of the story.

Ferner Nuhn

The Congregational Church in Fort Pearson stood three blocks west of the main business section. It was not the largest church in the city, the present pastor's wife had written her family in Massachusetts, but was fortunate in having several of the old families

(the "so-called old families," Mrs. Cheney put it) in its membership.

Automobiles were coming into increasing use in the Fort, but not many as yet seemed to appear at the church—except for Mrs. Jimmie Barr's electric brougham, and that was a rare occurrence. The familiar carriages of the faithful attenders still arrived, and the horses were tied to the iron hitching rods on the shady side street. An old woman sitting well hidden by vines on her front porch across from the church took her usual keen notice of the arrivals: Dr. Sherman's old-fashioned buggy in which he drove his wife to church, although he himself didn't attend; the well-known rig belonging to Harry Lanphear and his mother; the family carry-all of the Prentices pulling in from their farm three miles north of town. Miss Vivvy Kermit and Mrs. Kermit drove up in their small trim surrey. Vivvy stepped out first to fasten Katrina, the pretty brown mare.

"There *she* goes," was the old woman's silent, complacent, yet satirical comment. "Now I expect they can begin things over there!"

After the Kermits had entered the building, the old woman settled back, with no more to interest her now than organ and hymn music sounding. She had less curiosity concerning the people who came to church on foot—with the exception of the pastor and his family (his wife and fifteen-year-old daughter Edith). She always scrutinized *them*.

It would have pleased the old woman if she could have witnessed Vivvy Kermit enter the outside vestibule, rustling in taffeta, stopping a moment under the small Roman arch to nod to others coming, then going on into the auditorium and sailing down the aisle, all smiles under her large hat wreathed with ostrich tips, with her little mother in her wake. Vivvy seated herself in her usual pew "after getting mother settled." She moved with a pleasant wafting of sachet scent from laces and taffeta. This church was not wholly dependent upon the financial support of the Kermits, but Vivvy "liked to make herself felt." (It was thus privately put by the pastor. His wife used more caustic terms.) Vivvy Kermit was, if not undisputed queen—for there were other local great ladies in the medium-sized membership—a force. There was just time before the service began to get in a few greetings. Her hazel eyes quickly took in who was present and who not. She gave Harry Lanphear a friendly look and smiled very sweetly at his mother. The smile was not returned.

Protestant services still tended toward plainness at this period. But a few innovations had been introduced into this particular service with the coming of the present pastor—engineered chiefly by

Vivvy Kermit and Harry Lanphear, it was said. Those two, as people tended to speak of Vivvy and Harry (not meaning anything particularly damaging) had the running of such matters pretty much in their own hands. The two themselves, however, felt balked at every move. Vivvy was by *no* means satisfied with the service as it stood. Some day there would be a vested choir. But one couldn't attempt too many changes all at once—not in this town. (Vivvy never admitted any faults in town or church to outsiders but could be sharply critical herself.) The choir needed new voices—a new director first of all. The organist was a problem. Nonie Sabin had started playing the organ when she was fifteen; the Sabins had been loyal members since the early days. There seemed no nice way of getting Nonie to take a back seat; an attempt in that direction would raise the ire of all the old members. Nonie was getting really stout and looked awful from the back, sitting perched up on that organ bench. She had to hitch rather than to slide to reach some of the keys. The small pipe organ had been a joint gift of the Kermit and Lanphear families. It was getting old, but would last as long as this building did. Vivvy had an affection for both organ and building.

The service was finally about to begin. It was so familiar to Vivvy (stale, in fact) that she gave a gusty sigh which she turned at once into a cough; lifting her fine embroidered handkerchief which gave out that delightful fragrance when shaken from its folds. Bending toward her mother, she whispered, "Cold?"—then was afraid she might have to repeat her question aloud. But her mother had caught it.

"No, dearie."

At least Nonie Sabin wasn't trotting out the *Melody in F*. Had she learned something new? Impossible. This was a little number which must have been gathering dust in an old *Etude*. If Nonie was going to sit up there in front of everybody *why* couldn't she do her hair neatly? Vivvy screwed up her face in momentary pain. She said nothing about Nonie's dress because she knew how hard up the Sabins were. But a robe would have hidden it. So why some of these people. . . .

The Morning Processional, as it was now termed on the printed program which Dr. Cheney had introduced, consisted of the entrance from the small vestry room of the four members of the choir followed by the pastor. Vivvy had been inclined to regard Dr. Cheney as her protégé; her brother, Alton Kermit, now a lawyer in Brookline, Massachusetts, had brought him to the attention of the Com-

mittee on Selection. The church had reached the place, according to Vivvy's way of thinking, in which it needed just this type of man. But in looking for a pastor from the East, the committee had not reckoned on Mrs. Cheney—certainly Vivvy hadn't: an assured New England lady who did not propose to be told what was what by any person in Fort Pearson. *She* had come here to instruct others. She was the daughter of a long line of Puritan divines. Mrs. Cheney, in fact, had looked upon this midwestern church as a kind of Home Mission charge. Even when she had met some of its principal members—Miss Kermit, Mrs. Sherman, the Lanphears, Aunt Jane Conant—her opinion had been affronted rather than changed. Vivvy Kermit had so far avoided actual clashes with Mrs. Cheney. Vivvy had not entirely withdrawn approval from the family as a whole, but had turned rather cool. The daughter Edith was a disappointment. Vivvy could have laughed at herself now when she remembered her high hopes of having a girl from the East among the young people, one who might raise the general tone—and who to Vivvy herself might stand in the place of the niece whom she had expected to have with her this winter. Poor Edith: she seemed to have been trained and cut out to be the vicar's daughter in some novel of English country life, old style; and Mrs. Cheney wavered between the need for the pastor's daughter to enter in and take leadership and the fear that her child be contaminated by midwestern influences. Edith had not been enrolled in the local high school. She was having her lessons with her mother. But next year the Cheneys would probably strap themselves financially to send her back East to a proper preparatory school.

Dr. Cheney's appearance in the pulpit, however, almost restored Vivvy's complacency. His correct semi-clerical garb struck the right note. Vivvy approved of his distinguished Van Dyck beard—approved it, that is, for a clergyman. The other Protestant ministers were Reverends. Dr. Cheney was the first to be called *Doctor*.

"Oh, I'll get them moving along some day."

The Prelude should have modulated gradually into the music of the opening hymn, but Nonie could never grasp the idea. There must always be this break between, when the choir members stood with mouths open. Finally the music of the hymn came out in a burst that caught the congregation unprepared. The choir swung hastily into the tune and the congregation got going halfway through the first stanza. Harry Lanphear stood with brow flushed pink, chin lifted, laboring valiantly.

"Begin, my tongue, some heavenly theme—"

Vivvy was startled, thinking she heard a new voice. She stopped singing, letting only her lips move, and listened acutely.

“And speak some boundless thi-ing.”

The high soprano sounded clearly. Others heard it, too. Between stanzas, Harry Lanphear glanced over at Vivvy—he was across the aisle and a pew ahead—and lifted his eyebrows. Vivvy very slightly shook her head; the ostrich tips quivered. She observed the signs of Harry’s excitement. After he sat down, he kept fiddling with his eyeglasses, thrusting them on and off his nose.

Orilla Sherman, sitting in the same pew with Vivvy, leaned over past Mrs. Kermit—smiling apology—and touched Vivvy’s knee.

“New family,” she mouthed.

“Oh. Wife?” Vivvy’s lips formed.

Mrs. Sherman shook her head. “Daughter.”

Her forefinger pressed Vivvy’s knee. She had more to tell when the chance came. Vivvy took in the scrap of information. She wanted to catch a glimpse, but the new family was seated well forward, and Vivvy did not care to be caught gawking. She hid her curiosity beneath smiles while she waited for the second hymn. It was one Vivvy cared less for—belonged to what she called the “mournful” kind. But there had been no mistake. A fresh youthful voice rang out with joyous enthusiasm, even when it came to that puzzling line in the second stanza:

“Here I raise my Ebenezer.”

Vivvy felt she must see. At the close of the hymn, she dropped her gold mesh handbag on the floor of the aisle, and when people were getting settled again in their pews she stooped to retrieve it. She stood alone for a moment, taking her time until she had spotted the new family. She had got in one good look before sitting down herself.

Throughout the remainder of the service Vivvy felt enlivened. Prospects opened up before her again, although she would not let herself consider them now in any detail. She rather looked forward to a few necessary battles. Ah yes, the soprano-directress had heard that voice. Her broad face was flushed. She flatted worse than ever in the anthem. Harry Lanphear had been tearing his hair over the way Zara flatted, but said in despair that nobody would listen to him. People in this congregation apparently thought that Zara Hines Muller could do no wrong. Zara had run the music for so many years, as chief soloist and choir leader, that she hadn’t supposed there was any need for her to measure up. For people like dear old Aunt Jane Conant, who had no ear for music, it might not matter.

But to Harry and Vivvy this part of the service had become excruciatingly painful. A shake-up was long overdue. But, as with Nonie Sabin (although in the case of Zara, Vivvy felt little compunction) neither Vivvy nor Harry could find the opening wedge. This new voice—bright, young, unconscious—might afford an answer. (Vivvy felt an unexpected thrust of shame at her line of thought. But while living here in the Fort with her mother, as was her duty—as Harry’s duty lay with *his* mother—the church was one thing upon which she could spend her excess energy. To raise its tone was a worthy cause.)

Now that she knew where the family sat, Vivvy could catch more glimpses. She was disappointed by the parents. The mother she put down as wholly uninteresting. Although she might prove a good worker in the church, she was a plain woman wearing a straight felt hat with a dowdy flat bow. About the father Vivvy couldn’t be sure until she’d had a close-up view. But that child! Where did *she* come from? She must be in her late teens, no older. A wide-brimmed beaver hat drooped about her face but showed her bush of dark bright curls tied back with a ribbon. She was like a girl in a slightly old-fashioned picture—one of those Reginald Birch drawings in the *St. Nicholas* magazine which Vivvy used to take for her niece, Jessamine, who visited her. The girl leaned forward, and Vivvy could see her profile, with something both eager and pensive in its outline—a provocative blend.

The memorial windows (one of them for “Horace Kermit,” one for “Judson Adoniram Lanphear”) glowed with deep colors that seemed autumnal. Leaves drifted past the opening of the one let down from the top—polished elm leaves, some yellow-green, the first to fall.

Vivvy glanced at Harry Lanphear with a sparkle of malice; Harry was very susceptible to charming young girls. Vivvy knew the back of his neck so well!—the meaning of that slight cock of the head.

Ah, but to give Zara Hines Muller a run for her money! The thought might be un-Christian; but remembering how ruthlessly Zara had dominated the choir, and how she had kept out Harry Lanphear as leader when Harry had been able, and more than willing, to give the time—Harry with a real appreciation of music—Vivvy hardened herself.

To have something doing again, a new project now in the fall when the town was so pleasant and it was really beautiful out in the country—along with new clothes, clubs opening, winter activities getting started all along the line! Vivvy had reached the end of the summer tired, having entertained both married brothers and their

families in the old home. She enjoyed her brother Richard's wife, Emily, who was talented but made little of it—but Alton's wife was an altogether different proposition. Vivvy had been set on having Jessamine spend the winter with her, since Jess was to have a year of leisure before entering Wellesley—but Jessamine's mother had decreed otherwise. Alton had been more than willing; he had wanted his daughter to have time with her grandmother while her grandmother was still alive. It had been made clear, however, that his wife, Lenore, had considered Jessamine's staying longer in Fort Pearson a waste of time. She was jealous of the friendship between Jessamine and her Aunt Vivvy. Oh well—Vivvy shrugged her handsome shoulders—that was something she could overlook. But the other thing—that Lenore should look down upon her husband's mother as a little old country woman . . . that, Vivvy felt she could never forgive. The summer had left a bad taste. But now Vivvy suddenly felt herself in good fettle again. She would rather be in the Fort than anywhere else if it came down to that. The far-branching activities of her two brothers, which had made Vivvy restless and resentful (leaving the home duties to her) seemed less full of authentic flavor than her own. She leaned over and put her hand on her mother's, squeezing it and whispering, "How is oo, Sweetikin?"—although she knew her mother couldn't hear her.

During the last part of the service, Vivvy was impatient; she wanted Dr. Cheney to "quit drawing it out!" If truth be told, she found little of interest in the sermon. When the benediction was finally spoken, she bent over her mother and said into her ear, with effusive haste, "Can you wait for me here a second, ladybird?" It was no use hanging around Rilla Sherman now—the doctor was probably waiting outside in a big fret because the service had taken so long. Later, Vivvy could find out what Rilla knew. She liked to talk people over with Orilla Sherman because Rilla was related to almost everybody and heard everything but didn't give things out in the spirit of petty gossip, which Vivvy despised. But Vivvy was not going to let those new people get away without a closer look. She let out that malicious sparkle again as she sailed past Harry: he was all involved with his mother's wraps and doo-dads.

People wanted to speak to Vivvy, but she was thoroughly adept at making her way wherever she cared to go. She soon saw, however, that Mrs. Cheney had the new family in charge. Let Mrs. Cheney have her innings—Vivvy could meanwhile get a line on these people. Vivvy stopped to talk to Aunt Jane Conant but kept her eyes on the newcomers. Suddenly dropping Aunt Jane's cotton-gloved hand which

she had been holding affectionately (and Vivvy really did love all these old people in the church) she stepped across the aisle. Smiling and sparkling, she asked for an introduction; and immediately gave the effect of taking the whole group under her wing.

"So glad, Mrs. Cameron, Mr. Cameron." She didn't hesitate over the name which Mrs. Cheney had barely uttered. "It's so good always to see new faces among us." She did not linger with the parents, however, but dropped their hands almost as suddenly as she had Aunt Jane's—who was still peering around, murmuring to Mrs. Crabtree, "Why, I don't know how 'tis, Mattie, I thought Vivvy was here speaking to me." In one bright glance Vivvy took in the Cameron daughter. She held the girl's hand, pressing it while Mrs. Cheney stiffly murmured, "Miss Nanne Cameron," but turned smiling toward the parents.

"So this is the girl who sang like an angel!"

To congratulate the parents was the best move Vivvy could have made. The atmosphere was now charged with buoyancy.

Mr. Cameron, seen closer, was a thin and somewhat jaded-looking man, probably not in the best of health. But praise of his daughter brought life to his face, and then it showed a certain distinction. Vivvy swiftly noted that he might have been handsome—might be so now, in a way, except for a painful, drawn, and she was afraid, fretful look. As for the mother, she stood back looking primly pleased, perhaps—but oh, dear.

Others were now coming forward—as Aunt Jane observed with wonder: Aunt Jane was too slow, poor old lady, to have noticed that there were strangers in the congregation. The pastor was down from the platform, the choir members following him. Dr. Cheney was affable, taking far too long over his greetings, his wife considered. His place now should be beside the double doors opening into the outside vestibule.

Dr. Cheney was too attentive to the newcomers, also—Vivvy observed—to please his choir leader. But Mrs. Muller seemed to be carrying off the situation well. Vivvy Kermit, however, did not miss the flush on Zara's cheeks. Awareness of all these minor skirmishes, games, emotions running beneath the well-kept surface of church life was stimulating to Vivvy Kermit. It would have hurt Aunt Jane Conant had *she* been aware. But her dim old eyes were as unconscious of this under-play as the young girl's blue eyes in their setting of thick short lashes. Again Vivvy felt that same thrust of unexpected shame.

Harry got there finally. He had to bring his mother and fit his

steps to hers. Mrs. Lanphear had suffered a stroke of paralysis three years ago, from which nobody had expected her to recover even this much. But she had got up, learned to walk again after a fashion—enough to make Harry drag her everywhere, the less charitable said; others admired her resolution. Even now Harry couldn't do the talking. Mrs. Lanphear extended her trembling hand in its long pale-blue silk glove elegantly wrinkled, making others wait until she had finally got out what she had to say. Seated, Mrs. Lanphear did not look so much changed; but when standing, she was a shapeless, quivering mass—her silks shook and rustled as did the pastel-tinted ribbons and flowers on her hat, her chains and bracelets. Her long pink-and-blue feather boa was slipping from her shoulders. Harry bent to catch it, almost knocking heads with Dr. Cheney, his eye-glasses springing off his nose and dangling on their fine gold chain. The men might laugh, even some of the women might, but most women approved of Harry Lanphear's chivalrous devotion to his mother. He did look a bit foolish tenderly holding that boa.

The new young girl who was the center of attention in this welcoming process stood slight, eager, yet trustingly casual; her curls tied beneath the brim of that picturesque beaver hat with what seemed unconscious grace. Harry Lanphear was forming words in his mind: "Piquant. Utterly piquant." The father's pride was obvious through his drawn, querulous look. Both parents gave the effect of standing back. Yet the girl herself had an air of unselfconsciousness. "Most attractive," Harry thought.

But this could not go on forever. Vivvy had come to a decision. Putting her arm around the girl's slight shoulders, she cried gaily, "I must take you down to meet my little mother! She'll want to speak to the girl who sings." Lois Jackson, the alto in the choir, and Hobart Grimes and H. E. Bell, bass and tenor, here refrained from an exchange of glances. They knew well that Mrs. Kermit was even less likely to have heard the voice of the "angel," than Aunt Jane. But they also knew that Vivvy's mother had to share equally with Harry's mother! People might be amused, but Lois Jackson thought this rather nice on Vivvy's part. Lois, in fact, believed the devotion of both Harry and Vivvy to their respective mothers thoroughly genuine, and often defended the two.

Vivvy swept the young girl up the aisle along with her own silks and fragrance to where Mrs. Kermit waited with stoic patience in her pew. Whatever might be said of Mrs. Lanphear, it was agreed that Mrs. Kermit was a truly charming old lady, even if Vivvy did make such a fuss over her that people got tired: tiny yet hardy, "perfectly natural," with her black bonnet tied with sheer black ribbons under

her chin, the line of white edging her collar. The manner of dress might be Vivvy's idea, but it exquisitely suited Mrs. Kermit—who had been heard to say matter-of-factly, "I let Vivvy rig me out the way she likes." The good taste of this rigging showed in contrast to the astonishing ancient-belle get-up of Mrs. Lanphear, with its lilacs and pinks and baby-blues looking faded and run together—so that somebody's sharp tongue had once described Mrs. Lanphear as "an old French doll left out once too often in the rain."

Vivvy kept her hand on the young Miss Cameron's shoulder as she leaned toward Mrs. Kermit. "Mother"—she spoke in loud clear tones—"this is the owner of the beautiful voice that delighted us all this morning. Miss Nanne Cameron."

The words meant little or nothing to Mrs. Kermit, and it is doubtful if she caught the name. But the old woman loved young people. She lifted her small hand in its white glove. Vivvy had the good sense to let her mother wear comfortable fabric gloves, but of spotless white, not dingy old brown like Aunt Jane's. Mrs. Kermit and Aunt Jane Conant had lived on neighboring farms when they were girls; Mrs. Kermit's own sense of style would have been no more advanced than her old friend's, if it had not been for her daughter's attention. Mrs. Kermit's appearance might be aristocratic in her black and white, but her voice kept its pioneer accent, and she, like Aunt Jane, held to the old terms of speech. Here, too, Vivvy had the taste to make something of this as charming "quaintness" instead of trying to change her mother.

"Glad to see, you dearie. Are you goin' to live with us here at the Fort? What say? I'm a little deaf. Well, we can't have too many young folks." Mrs. Kermit added, "You must come over and visit with us. I can't do much callin' now-days. The gals all have to come in and set with *me*."

Vivvy cooed, "All right, sweetie, she will. Everybody comes to see you, don't they?" She took her mother's hand and laid it back gently in the old woman's lap.

People watching this scene were as impressed as Vivvy meant them to be. She didn't quite know how to regard the new family as a whole, but this child was the bright particular star of this Sunday morning. Most onlookers were pleased; one or two thought, "Well, this promises they'll be taken in. She has them in tow already." Lois Jackson was among those really gratified as well as amused by the way Vivvy had swept the young girl out from under Harry Lanphear's very eyes. At the same time, she felt some compunction and compassion for Zara Muller, with the red spots on her cheeks and the knowledge of the ruin she had made of the solo part in the anthem.