The Courtship of Susan Bell

Mrs. Bell invited Aaron Houston, a famous British artist, to paint her younger daughter's portrait. Aaron wanted to make a few drawings before he started a portrait. On the Thursday evening the drawing was finished. Not a word had been said because the girls were shy to speak in Aaron's presence and he had gone on working in silence. "There," said he, "I don't think that it will be any better if I go on for another hour. I hope you will like it. There, Miss Susan," and he sent it across the table with his fingers.

Susan's face got red, she was embarrassed. She took the drawing and said, "Oh, it's beautiful." The superb originality of the drawing captivated her. A young girl was represented sitting at a table in a room filled with fresh air and the soft light of a summer day. The greenery of an old overgrown garden could be seen through the window. In front of her on the white tablecloth there was her book. The eyes of the girl looked out at you, dark grey, mysterious, sad, languorous, yet strangely intent. What was the girl thinking about? Who was the girl thinking about? The drawing was more than a portrait. It fact, the artist tackled a far bigger job than that of reproducing a definite person in portraiture and in performing which he imparted another and bigger content.

Susan's face revealed her feelings. She turned to her mother and said, "Isn't it beautifully done, mother?" and then her elder sister and her mother got up to look at it, and both admitted that it was beautifully done but Susan felt there was doubt in her mother's voice.

"We thank you very much," said Susan after a long pause.

"Oh, it's nothing," said he, not quite liking the word "we".

On the following day he returned from his work to Saratoga about noon. He had never done this before, and therefore no one expected that he would be seen in the house before the evening. On this occasion, however, he went straight there, and by chance both the widow and her elder daughter were out. Susan was there alone in charge of the house.

He walked in and opened the sitting-room door. There she sat, with her knitting and a book forgotten on the table behind her, and Aaron's drawing, on her lap. She was looking at it closely as he entered.

"Oh, Mr. Dunn," she said, getting up and holding the picture behind her dress.

"Miss Susan, I have come here to tell your mother that I must start for New York this afternoon and be there for six weeks, or perhaps, longer."

"Mother is out," she said. "I am sorry."

"Is she?" said Aaron.

"And Hetta too. Dear me! And you will want dinner. I'll go and see about it."

Aaron began to swear that he could not possibly eat any dinner.

"But you must have something, Mr. Dunn" she said.

"Miss Susan," said he, "I've been here nearly two months."

"Yes, sir," Susan said, hardly knowing what she was saying.

"I'm going away now, and it seems to be such a long time before I'll come back." And then he paused, looking into her eyes, to see what he could read there. She leant against the table; but her eyes were turned to the ground, and he could hardly see them.

"Will you help me?" he said. She was keeping silent. "Miss Susan," he continued, "I am not very good at saying things like this, but will you marry me? I love you dearly with all my heart. I never saw anyone so beautiful, so nice, so good." And then he stopped. He didn't ask for any love in return. He simply declared his feelings, leaning against the door. Susan remained silent. Aaron ran out of the room.

What was unusual about Aaron's visit on the following day? He came...

1. ...later than usual.
2. ...earlier than usual.
3. ...straight from Saragota.
4. ...without prior arrangement.