

Chapter 3

The chapter follows the narrator's visits to Sophie, a girl he befriends, during their informal schooling breaks. Their mornings are spent learning basic skills from elderly women, leaving afternoons free for exploration. Once Sophie's injured ankle heals, she shows him her favorite spots, and he takes her to see a steam-engine, a rare and prized possession in their community. The engine's rhythmic noises and mechanical movements fascinate them briefly before becoming monotonous, prompting them to climb a nearby wood-pile. There, they discuss the "Old People," with Sophie skeptical of the legends about their advanced abilities, while the narrator insists on their marvels.

Their conversation shifts to the Old People's supposed ability to fly, which Sophie dismisses as impossible. The narrator considers sharing a dream about flying objects but decides against it, recognizing its lack of credibility. Later, they visit Sophie's home, where her father, John Wender, greets them warmly. Though initially wary of the narrator, Wender eventually befriends him, though the narrator senses lingering unease. The chapter hints at underlying tensions, particularly Wender's concern over Sophie's sprained ankle and the narrator's involvement, suggesting deeper conflicts in their society.

A flashback reveals a tense incident at the narrator's home, where an offhand remark about needing "another hand" sparks outrage from his father. The father interprets this as blasphemy, accusing his son of rejecting the "Norm"—the divinely ordained human form. The narrator's attempts to explain are dismissed, and he is forced to recite doctrine about the Norm being the "Image of God." The confrontation underscores the rigid, oppressive beliefs of their community, where even casual expressions can be condemned as heresy.

The chapter highlights the contrast between the children's curiosity and the adults' dogmatic adherence to tradition. The narrator's friendship with Sophie and their discussions about the Old People reflect a yearning for knowledge beyond their restrictive world. Meanwhile, the father's harsh reaction to the narrator's innocent remark illustrates the fear and intolerance surrounding deviations from the Norm. This tension between exploration and repression sets the stage for broader conflicts in the narrative, emphasizing themes of conformity, rebellion, and the search for truth.

