

"Who was it this time?"

"You."

"Not very flattering by the ^{grimace} on your face - almost snarling."

He felt a slight tremor go through her body. Was it anger, hate or love? It's all the same, ^{he thought.} She added after a pause, "Wait till I see you

alone tonight."

"Didn't know I was going to see you - alone tonight."

"But you will."

"Very masterful, almost imperious," he said sardonically, "but..."

and he looked at her almost defiantly as he paused abruptly. He

thought ~~to himself~~ that he was being silly to take the whole thing seriously. "Well of course, I'll see you tonight. And alone." And he

smiled almost derisively. But ^{at} that moment her eyes were implicitly on the road, and she didn't see it.

CHAPTER V

When We Are Alone Tonight

The pungent apple cider, with its autumnal freshness, teamed well with the crisp bacon and tangy ham, and eggs, just come from the henery; the great white pitchers of milk and cream, covered with fresh white cloths, proved a satisfying and an admirable counter-balancing bland-elixir that cooled their gullets. The farmhouse, accomodating an occasional tourist, was spruce and clean and smelled of hay and harvest and cows and horses, and the acrid burning of fall leaves. The scene, the tempting display of food was enough to whet a jaded appetite, let alone four youngsters out on a spree.

George appropriately blessed the earth and the fulness thereof between gastronomic mouthfuls, and vowed that within sane or insane memory he had

never eaten such an edacious meal. Blanca was complaining that if she ate more she wouldn't make it behind the wheel.

George rhymed: "To lay more feed away, 'lay' in the hay and sleep the day away."

"Well!" Blanca snorted with fluttering nostrils as she glared at him, "drunk with cider!"

"Shakespearean pearls dropping from George's mouth," Cynthia smiled at George. Perhaps she didn't get the implication of the words, only the rhyme.

"Just droolings from a mouth full of dainty morsels," Foster observed blandly.

George said
"Or the vaperings of the spirit of the flesh." Then looking directly into Blanca's eyes, "Take it as you will."

Blanca wasn't quite sure how to take it. But she was taken with surprise at George's upsurge in the use of a word so alien to him. Unless it had another meaning hidden from her. Shrugging her shoulders as if to ignore the episode she declaimed: "Lady and gentlemen, it is my good fortune to announce that this repast is on the lady of the house. She had suddenly become fond of us and has whispered in my ear her fondness. The only payment she requires is that we pay her at least another visit."

"Now you have gone off into Queerland," Foster protested.

"You don't understand," George said. "What our little lady here is trying to tell us is that she is paying or already has paid for our scrumptious victuals here. See, I am not quite drunk with the cider or the feed."

Foster who took his gentleman's prerogative seriously was nonplussed at the interpretation put upon Blanca's words. Taking out his wallet he called for the farmer's wife. Then for the farmer when she didn't respond. When he didn't answer Foster went out looking for them.

"You sit there content like the proverbial cat that swallowed the canary," George turned on Blanca, "you know something about our vanishing hosts, speak up."

"And who orders me, pray?"

Cynthia said she loved cows and chickens. She would go out and look at the young brown cow again; look into her big brown eyes.

When Cynthia was gone and George faced Blanca alone he was overcome with a sense of remorse. If her act was arbitrary, or even arrogant, it was nevertheless a generous gesture. Blanca has grown up, no doubt of it. And by her very nature and abandon in spending money she is bound to be a bit domineering. He felt the new aspect of their relationship, even a strangeness, being borne in upon him as the wisps and wafts of scents from an alien land. This was a new Blanca, a woman, with whom he hardly knew how to ^{face.} keep. She had grown and passed him, while he had remained at his play-acting, and his romantics. Has the time for play ended, and the seriousness of realism taken its place? Above all is he ready to accept a realism which is not of his making, and hardly of his world? If this be the the dividing of their ways, he wouldn't institute the move, the act, nor speak the word. If it comes, it'll come of itself.

To her he said with a pained smile, "I am sorry. Was rather brutal."

"Forget it," with a cheerful note in her voice, as her strained face assumed its natural dark glow. She was the smiling radiant Blanca of before - long ago. And a long time it seemed to him. Did it really matter how long? Or was it of importance to him whether or not she really had reverted to those old days, the girlish days, the funny days, when he would chase her around the round dining-room table, and finally catch up with her, and she feigning breathlessness as a cause of her falling in his arms? Soon she'd be back in that man-and-woman world, where man marries woman, makes a home, and has children. A world not his - at least not yet. "I can't understand what the squawking is about," ^{she went on,} "I have more money than I know what to do with..."

"If I had known..." George started to protest.

"If you had known! I hope you don't get indigestion, now that you know. But you'll have good use for the money you'd have spent."

"I will?"

"Sure. Aren't you coming back with me at least part of the way? You wouldn't let a 'lady' travel alone at night!"

"So that's the way we are going to meet alone tonight. You had all figured to save my money for the train back."

"Couldn't let you spend money ~~some~~ twice the same day."

"Tell me, is there ever away to get around you?"

"You ought to know," she tilted her ^{head} up in the sly way she had. Sly and yet proud and pretty.

The bait is tempting and the trap is wide open for him. Will he be caught in it?

If any words were exchanged between them during the long miles between Wheelport and Augusta on their homeward ~~trunk~~ ^{trek} they were few and unrelated to personal mutuality. Though silence was burdensome and oppressive to both, when so much had to be said, yet it was a premeditated pact in a strained relationship in which they were thrown together. Perhaps too much had been said already. Blanca hadn't realized it until the drive and her concentration at the wheel had clarified to her her actions of the day. And the picture ~~of it~~ wasn't beatific, nor hallowed. It showed her that she had literally thrown herself at George's feet. How ^{such} a thing could happen to her, the once proud Blanca, she hardly ^{could} visualize in her mind! She remembers that first urge to drive to Wheelport was more in the nature of adventure than anything else. True, she had wanted to see George. She wasn't even sure what that wish was. Perhaps no more than one wanted to see a close friend of years standing. And George was ~~close~~ to her since she could remember. Had there been a time when she hadn't known George? He seemed always to ^{have been} (be there) when she wanted or needed him. And now these last months when she had lost complete

or sense touch of him, when she hadn't felt his presence - for the first time in her memory - there was a sense of loss and vacancy in her; an unaccountable void, at times quite depressing. Blanca, proud and even haughty, unaccustomed to negation, and the frustrations and repressions, had decided on the bold resolve to demolish the bleak abode in which she ^{was} dwelling. ... if she couldn't prevail ^{upon him} to come to Portgrave for a brief visit she'd go to him. Perhaps it was no deeper than a feeling of nostalgia that drew her to him, but as she set forth on the journey it built up, even if gradually, into something akin to love. A feeling at first she was not sure of herself, perhaps not even aware. But with the exhilaration of the trip, the autumn air, the new vistas, the first sight of George (looking so fresh and manly) and the adventure of new surroundings, the palpitating life of a college town, the camaraderie - and later the food in the country - an intoxication ^(that) prompted her to give way to an emotion so strange to her, and over which she had no control. That quick temper and passion of hers! Had she said things that would shame her later - like a drunkard on sobering? The mind never was clearer, the heart was calm, but her thoughts were muddled.

"Methinks he protested too much". And as the well known phrase kept recurring in his mind, George wondered whether after all he was in love with Blanca, all his protestations to the contrary; ~~and~~ ^{was} all his fine resolutions merely a bland facade behind which he is trying to hide his true feelings. Will it always be his fate to remain behind that wall, an outsider, a stranger to all natural feelings and passions as a youth and as a man - of being in love! The very thought frightend him. ~~(Does he really want to live in a world of the "theeafter" where the sky is always blue and calm and the clouds a rosy and fleecy carpet, where the angels in their hosts tread and chant halleluiahs to a God sitting on his throne, flaming sapphire blue?)~~ A strange world, unknown,

^{in which} yet to live ~~in~~ and effect our experiences in ^{an} environment of illusion, so nostalgically crystal clear and prismatic in the mind's eye!

The blast of air through the car was crisping and cool. It braced him. "Methinks he protesteth too much". Yah, methinks I am a stinker, an unmitigated prig. Damn it all, do I care for her? Do I know what the effect on me if she turned away from me — and to Harold? Pedant that I am! May be it would bring me to my senses. Or would it? Then again, how much does she care? ~~Does~~ she love — deeply — or am I just a habit to her, ^{a prop,} the narcosis of "Georgeism"? A habit which had plagued her all these years — my constant presence — and which she hadn't been able to shake off. But now that she had suddenly grown up this may prove the last flicker of whatever it was — love or painful habit.

When we are alone tonight!

They were alone all these miles between Wheelport and Augusta, and hardly a word of what was uppermost in their minds passed their lips. Maybe it was the night travel, the cool breezes, the vastness of the night and the mystery of it that made them into little and separate worlds of their own; ^(one) forgetting, for the ^{moment} ~~time being~~, the existence of the other. Or maybe under the influence of so many wonders of the night — a floating star, a flying meteor, the moon, a silent tree, silhouetted against a bare sky, the rattle of the dry skeletal branches, or even ² a scooting animal across the swath of light from the onrushing automobile — ^{the} things which had formerly been poignantly of the dimension of destiny itself, and had been so unsettling, had lost their importance and been cut down to size. Did they see light in the darkness of the night, or was it an undeclared truce?

Those little irritations and impediments!

It was still early evening when they rolled into Augusta, and the bright streets and the cheer of the lighted homes, shining rose and pink through the windows, the briskness of the people abroad, gave the

impression of a brilliant dress-rehearsal for some theatrical pageant, perhaps in anticipation of the approach of the Northern Winter in this case. As if the people and the town were putting forth their best face, to show off and delight in the balmy fall before the onrush of storm and cold. It was a relief to the travelers to come into the life of light again.

"There is a shiny restaurant across from us, bright and warm looking," Blanca exclaimed, "let's have a bite to eat."

"All right, but I pay."

As Blanca drove up to the entrance, "We'll settle later."

"For me the matter is settled now, or we don't go in."

"Must we quarrel again? All right." She took George's arm and followed him in.

It was a small place, but cozy and clean. At this hour there were only a few customers. They had the choice of many tables, but George chose one ~~way~~ well in the rear. Maybe he felt the need of ~~some~~ seclusion, though he wasn't sure how he would utilize it. Would the words come? The right words. But he had no idea as to what he wanted to say. He could think, perhaps, after they had sat down and ordered. And then while they ate. But Blanca immediately antagonized him ~~ordering~~ only coffee and pie. He took it as an insult.

"Why," he said sardonically, "don't you think the treasury would stand a bigger budget?"

"Have I insulted your pocketbook because I am not very hungry just now, or your dignity? Which is it, George? But you have no score to settle in either case, for you'll have plenty ^{of} use for your money to pay for the fare back from Portgrave. That is if you are going that far."

"I am," he said bluntly. He called for the waiter. "Now, what will you have beside coffee and pie?"

"You are very upsetting tonight. More than usual, even for you." She seemed distraught; her face drawn; her voice ^{strained, and} had a stern note in

it. "I think the whole thing was a mistake."

"What thing?"

"As if you didn't know. My trip of course."

"As an adventure it was a success."

"How do you mean?"

"The suspense and uncertainties of it."

"Enough of your riddles. Order what you wish, and let's be getting on."

He ordered for both. They ate.

When they were finished she said, "I better take you to the station here, and you take the train back."

"I am going to Portgrave."

"The 'adventure' I see got you good." She relaxed and smiled ^{at} to him.

A form of amnesia was upon them - the exclusion of the past (and the present) - on this last lap of the journey.

In the suburbs of ^oPortgrave, Woodfords and Deering, most of the citizenry ^(were) was still enjoying a last measure of relaxation, before turning in for the night, either in an easy chair or at a game of cards, or whatever was at hand to terminate the tediousness of the vacant hours before bed-time. The maidens and swains of the town might still be experimenting, and in search of new pleasures to be found in each other's clasp.

It was assumed that there would be a train back for George between the hour of eleven and midnight, but neither of them was sure of the exact time. The possibility of George staying over ^(for) the night never was suggested by either. His staying over if not a perplexity would at least be superfluous, and may even prove an inconvenience. To make sure Blanca put on an extra burst of speed as they passed through the silent streets of the small towns. As the sleek vehicle hurtled along with what seemed incredible speed, George involuntarily grabbed at the side of his

seat to steady himself.

She was rushing by The Oaks, and gnarled branches huddling their faded leaves almost seemed to obstruct their passage at every turn. But she passed them with a minimum of damage, perhaps a clipped leaf here and there, that was dying anyway, and, maybe, a splintered twig, bent and broken at the very heart. She took the sharp upgrade to Congress Street with hardly any delay, and with never a murmur from the overtaxed motor. It was long past the hour of eleven when they reached the concourse of Union Station, but luckily there was time enough for the purchase of a ticket and an unhurried goodbye.

The grounds around the station were mournfully desolate and dark. Inside, the station was dim and dingy and smelling of mould and dampness and stale tobacco. The few naked bulbs suspended from the ceiling, the untidiness and the few bedraggled lonely travelers dozing here and there on the bare wooden benches, made the place more dismal than if it were dark and empty.

Now there came the crackling and chattering of the rails, and a distant hoot, from the oncoming locomotive. There was a rushing of the few passengers from the station to the second track, where the train was to arrive. George and Blanca were among them. The engine sped by them, puffing and hissing with a new life, palpitating and pulsing with power that made the ground tremble. The sheer power and massiveness of such a monstrosity always exhilarated George. Yet as of this moment he wondered if such power and speed could be halted in time for the passengers to mount the cars. But right then there came a screeching of metal upon metal, with sparks flying under the wheel-trucks, and a sudden halt.

He heard himself saying to Blanca that he was grateful for her visit. And he was holding her hand tightly clasped in his. Then he felt the tight grip of her fingers. Suddenly her arms were around his neck, and her lips, sharp and humid, were upon his, and he felt the sensuousness

of her young (~~body~~) breasts against his body. Then, as if in a dream, he heard the piercing sound of the conductor's whistle and the warning blast from the dwarfed stack of the locomotive, and felt the first impulse of motion. And he was on the first rung of a moving coach, and Blanca was waving to him. And then she was gone.

It was long after midnight when George reached his room in the Torbets dormitory on the campus. His roommate, Foster, was fast asleep, and he crept silently to his cot without putting on the light. It had been a long and tiresome day, and the night had been no better, and he fell into a state of somnolence almost immediately. He was still in that stage of dreamy wakefulness, entering upon the border of slumber, when he felt his cot moving and he with it. Surely it must be a dream. He had had dreams before when he had felt light in sort of a flighty way, and had that wonderful sensation of floating in thin air. Then there was an awareness of a jerking motion - a pull and a stop. At the next pull he was suddenly brought to. His sleepiness ran off him like a sun-shower. He shivered for a bit in the dark chilly room and sat up. The couch was moving, he wasn't dreaming. It was an unsteady movement, but always in the general direction of the window. He jumped up as if stung. He snapped on the lights and turned toward Foster who was sitting up and blinking.

"What's matter, George? What you standing like a statue? Don't you want uh, uh... sleep?" And he yawned prodigiously.

"I was asleep, at least I think I was, when this... this...!"

"This... this what!" he mimicked. "Now will you turn out the light and let me sleep." And he threw himself back on his cot.

"I know it's crazy, but the cot and I were moving. It woke me."

"Well, it's not moving now." He drew his blanket over his head.

"All right, sap, whoever was doing it stopped with the lights on."

From under the blanket: "Another pipe-dream of yours. Ghosts you know

shun the light!"

"Very clever," George ^{went over} to the end of the couch near the window.

"That's it, George, now close the window so they won't pull you through it." "I have a hard day tomorrow, football practice and three classes."

"Look, Foster, a rope through the window, and it's leading ^{to} the couch!" As he bent over, "Sure enough, tied to one of the legs of the cot."

"Well, I'll be darned," Foster jumped up in a convulsion of laughter, "so that's it?"

"Now ~~if~~ ^{if} you tell me ~~(what's)~~ what it ^{is} maybe I'll laugh too."

With tears of laughter still in his eyes he was able to blurt out his suspicion as to whose handiwork it was. "You see, George, they were waiting with pails of water at the head of the stairs for both of us. But since you hadn't showed up with me I had to bear the full force of the deluge myself. And believe me it was a sudden and cold tidal wave that overtook me. There's my shirt and trousers still wet hanging up ⁱⁿ the corner there. Hope they'll dry by morning. Well, I suppose I'll have to wear something else."

"The hell with what you are going to wear, Go on."

"There is nothing much else, except perhaps that they waited at the door of our room to slap my wet back. Then they told me I was a good sport, that my debt ^{had been} paid in full, and the score was even. There was no greater sin they said than for two freshmen to ride in a gorgeous car with two gorgeous females, and letting Sophomores stand by with drooling mouths and hanging tongues."

"Well, the little devils!" and George couldn't refrain from letting out a loud guffaw himself. "Nothing passes them, and they don't forget. Well, we expected something in the way of a prank, didn't we? You think my score is even now?"

"I think so. You weren't to get off so easy, but I begged off for you. Your sin was greater than mine, having the audacity of leaving with a beautiful brunette, and for parts unknown. You might have gotten a dunking in the Sennebec, or a dousing with cold water while asleep. But I told them

that your going was not a matter of your cheating, that you'd rather not have gone. So they said they would be lenient, and would consider the manner of retribution. So that's it. Not bad at all, George. Congrats. And your sins are forgiven."

"When could they have rigged up the thing?"

"Must be when I was asleep. Didn't hear a thing though."

"Think of someone waiting up for me, to pull the rope!"

"They must have had relays. But the last one certainly had the goose pimples guffawing. He had his reward. O, there must have been plenty willing to stay up to pull the rope under you in the eerie hours of the morning."

"Cute rascals. Sorry for you, Fester, that you had to take the water all by yourself. Shall I laugh?"

"You may well laugh. Even if you had been with me when I came in, it might have ^{been} a matter ^{of} who stepped in first."

"At least I would have gotten a little splash."

PART XI

Chapter I

Life is By Moments, And in Between We Just Struggle

At Post Election Deliriums

The election of Woodrow Wilson stunned the ^{good} citizens of Wheelport. Inured to Republican rule in the White House, the sudden and complete ¹ reversal came as a shock to them. To the younger generation it was a distinct novelty, for within their conscious existence there has always been a republican president.

To the big and little in the business world; to the laborer, the crafts-