

its road of life. A month and more old. Perhaps not any more of the X-Unknown, but of the Known and the Knowing. Has it gained knowledge? The beginning of the Mother knowledge, the Womb Intelligence!

Cynthia's was a complex mind, and the complexity deepened when her mind worked at a furious rate. It was in a furious state of activity now. Exams - another X - are at hand. And that Thing. Furious! Furious activity in mind, and -body.

This, that and the other thing! What shape and quality that other thing! It can be the peace and blueness of the sky at eventide. And she stretched out her hand and grabbed a chunk of it. At least tonight she would have rest and peace from her torturing thoughts. She'd go to the affair. Bridge and dance. Dance! She'll dance and dance, until... Who knows?

Such was the fury and complexity of her mind!

CHAPTER VIII

When We Do Dance

They were throwing pillows about in the North dorm, and an occasional bucket of water on some unsuspecting victim if he happened in the right time, and when the pressure was at its height. The victim would smile and maybe appreciate the cooling effect of the cold water, for he had been under the same pressure. That same victim had the full schedule of the others, namely, exams and preparation for exams, getting the right notes at hand, sorting out others, looking over some of the previous exams on the same subject, taking notes from various sources, and crowd them in-

away

to his head, or put them for future references. The cold bucket cooled off the fever in his brains. It cooled his body in the same process. The clothes are a little wet, but what of it. The radiators are hot. It feels good to walk around in your trunks (you are justified) and you are somewhat of a hero. All doors are open to you; and all notes from generations past, on any subject whatsoever, are spread out for your inspection. Just be kind enough to ask for them. Ah, but even so there are too many things to commit to memory, and you flinch before the mountain, and cudgel your poor brain. But don't you worry, the soothsayers and the wise old men of the upper classmen have an uncanny knowledge (call it intuition) as to the most likely, perhaps unlikely, questions to come up, and advise you accordingly. There is just the slightest suspicion in your mind that you may have embarked on the wrong course, or jumped on the wrong dark horse, that you maybe a scapegoat of their frayed nerves, the butt, the fool; that they are taking advantage of your gullibility, that it's all horseplay; but you are helpless, because you ^{have} frittered the months ^{away} in folly, thinking you had the subject well in hand. It seemed so easy when the semester had first started. The prof with humor was even belittling his own course, telling you how little effort, and how little ~~brains~~ brains it required to master it. But he is a cunning one. Was he spreading a net out for you, while he -lying in ambush - would jump ~~at~~ you ~~at~~ you at the most inopportune (to him the most ^{opportune} ~~opportune~~ times with his most disconcerting quizzes? Ah, yes, the serpent-like fangs of his tests! That should have been warning enough. But ~~they~~ haven't, and now you are at their mercy. And they are all gathered around you pumping you full with knowledge. Your head is splitting, but the merry-go-round goes on. They have to have their outlet, and ^{it} happened along at the right time. And maybe they are rehearsing for themselves at the same time. And maybe they are really doing a job of mercy after the unmerciful dunking.

George hadn't escaped the mood of the campus, (Himself) ^{also} under mild

pressure, he had gotten a high-pressure snow ball right smack on his mouth. It stung and stunned him for a moment, but he smiled. He understood, and was glad to be part of the general upheaval and eruption of tempers. The assailant was nowhere in sight, maybe it was a stray one.

It had been snowing most of the afternoon, but the flakes were dry, light and feathery, and that was fortunate for George. A wet hard ball might have left its mark on his face - blue and swollen lips, perhaps - not an aspect to relish at a social that night. A social affair at this time of year was out of season and preposterous in the eyes of George and others on the campus, but to the good people of Wheelport it was otherwise. To them it was the zenith of the social season. Charity affairs, many of them, and this was one of them. It was to be divided in two parts, the first half for bridge, the second to be given over to the dance. In between the halves - ah, the rub! he, George, was to deliver a short talk. Any talk. Mrs. Berely, as was to be expected, was the chairman of the shindig. She had put the invitation to him. She had chosen the proper moment for the request, when George was under the stimulating influence of a good roast beef, and the befuddling vapors of good ("imported," Mr. Berely reported) wine. It seemed they were celebrating another killing by the host, netting another thousand. And though Mrs. Berely suspected that a good part of it would go for the maintenance of the store which was a losing proposition, she was nevertheless willing, even happy, to spend part of the winnings on a good spread. It'll go into that hell-hole anyway, as Mrs. Berely had expressed herself. George had noted the look of adoration and yearning in Betty's face, saw the tiny irrepressible muscles on Mrs. Berely's face run together and marshal themselves - when he had nodded his consent - into an expression of gratification and content. And later into gracious appreciation. Mr. Berely just grinned. His redoubtable wife! She dominates him, why not George!

Next morning, when the blood ^{had} cooled off from the effects of the wine and roast, he was for cancelling his venture into the field of public speaking, ^{it} seeming at this clear hour in the morning to be tiresome and adventurous, but how could he forget his hostess and her roasts, ~~and~~ and above all Betty's admiring nostalgic eyes!

The evening of the affair had arrived. There was to be an examination in philosophy next morning, and his mind was studded with the brilliants from Spinoza, Locke and Kant. Especially Kant. It seemed to him that Kant had gathered his ideas from a void, and that they led to a void, and what was worse - his mind was a void. As of this moment he couldn't pop an idea about this whole business of philosophy worth mentioning. Well, ~~it's an idea!~~ it's an idea! Why not talk on Kant at this frolic. They wouldn't know what he was talking about anyway, bent as they would be to ^{going} on with the second half of the program - dancing. What a spot he was put in, between bridge and dancing! If ever there was a hot spot - even hell had nothing on it. Well, let there be hell. It would do him good to talk on Kant, to flagellate his brain over nothing. For he knows less what's Kantism than Kant himself ever knew. Good, he'll talk. Just talk. No formal preparation, just talk what comes to mind. And on Kant. He assumed that his brain cells had absorbed something of Kant's observations on the universe, let them exude their honey when the time came. He'll put on plenty of pressure. What fun! He had forgotten about that snow ball he had received in the gathering dusk in his teeth. That memento that still let itself be felt on his lips, slightly swollen and discolored. He went to ^{the} bath room and applied more cold towelling. Still an hour or more. By that time the thing might disappear, or leave a mark only he would be conscious of. As he felt around his mouth with the tip of his tongue he became aware of a slight numbness both at the tip of the tongue and on the upper lip, just about the center of it. An impediment in speech! It struck him funny, and

he laughed out loud. Maybe he'll lisp. He always liked the sound of lisps. He pronounced a few words with an "s" in them, and he was satisfied that he affected that desired ^{impediment}. He'll stammer too. That's for sure. At least at the beginning of his talk. Would he ^{have} stage-fright? He didn't think so; well, not much anyway. He'd be thinking what to say, and thinking quite hard. And that's enough for anybody. One emotion at a time: Concentration.

Now, a quick shower and he'd be ready. Ah, where is that clean undershirt? He had intended to wash it in the morning, or the latest in the afternoon so it would be dry by now, But he had forgotten. Well, the radiators are hot. Washing it now might dry on them on time.

Jenkins, the student-minister, came into the shower room.

"That you, George, under Noah's flood?"

"Ever take a shower, damned Eng...?" George gurgled and choked.

"Almost choked, Should have kept a dry mouth."

"And not damn the English."

"I am too polite you know. And always answer. And say the things I shouldn't. But you know I only curse you."

"All right then, keep a dry tongue - for the time being... Now what is it I see on the radiator. It is white, and has the semblance of some undergarment steaming. It's a shirt! Now, don't tell me, George, keep a dry tongue. I don't want you to drown. Yes, it's a shirt. Now don't tell me. But what would a shirt be ^{doing} on a radiator, and a wet one at that? The answer is obvious - to dry it. The owner, having no clean shirt, and being in a hurry to go somewhere, and being desirous to wear a clean shirt, had obviously washed it just recently, and now he is in a hurry to have it dried. Isn't it so?"

"All right, go to blazes, Jenks. You are very clever." Coming out

of the shower, drying himself, "You know, Jenk, I never quite realized what a brilliant brain sits under that red dome of yours. Very astute. What you see there is a shirt, and it's mine. And I am going out. And I didn't have a clean shirt, and I washed, and now I am drying it."

Jenkins's freckled, wizened little face contracted into his familiar crinkling, good-humored smile. He was very fond of George, one of his very few close contacts at school.

"Now, I came to talk Shakespeare for tomorrow's exam, but you....? Well, you have to take it tomorrow?"

"Yes, and philosophy," George said.

"So why not study instead of going out."

"Promise."

"For once break it. Anyway you don't go out in this small-sized blizzard, after a hot shower, and in a wet shirt." He took it from the radiator and swished it about. "Still quite damp."

"Let's have it." George snatched it from Jenkins and put it on. He hopped and rushed about. "Dry quicker this way." Pause. "Have an idea, Jenk. Why not come along. We'll find plenty of time to talk Shakespeare. On the way, and there. While they prattle, we'll talk Shakespeare - to each other. What say?"

"Imagine, my Shakespeare, and I have to sit at your feet! How come?"

"Just stupid," and he slapped his friend on the back. "Now begin talking while I dress. And keep it up."

All the way to Bonslow where the affair took place, through the hike over the span of narrow bridge over the Kennebeck, the two friends talked Shakespeare. The snow had eased, but the grey sky sent down a raw

chill instead that crept through George's damp shirt and caused his skin to goose-pimple. ~~With~~ George ran a bit, stamped his feet and recited Shakespear, and got a bit of warmth after a while, and his teeth stopped chattering.

There was welcome light and heat in the hall.

Mrs. Berely extended a welcome hand: "Glad you could come; as they say: 'better late than never'". Her full round face dimpled at the cheek bones, and her black eyes flashed such warmth that it gave one an acute sensation of content and well-being to remain in her embracing presence. "Your friend?" She smiled her warmly smile upn Jenkins, before George had had time to introduce him. Jenkins stood rooted in his admiration of this large handsome woman, who had so much charm and composure.

"Our hostess, Mrs. Berely, Jenks; Jenkins is a classmate."

Jenkins took Mrs. Berely's extended hand, bowed slightly: "A more gracious hostess I never met."

"Flatterer," she laughed easily.

"No, he means it," George said, and then prankishly, "you know, or don't you, he is English, and sort of slow on the take up. Wait'll he knows you better."

"I ought to ^{chastise} you for this," she bantered, "but since I depend on you to ^{to} lecture us, I shall forego the pleasure." She turned and faced her playing public-- and the card tables. "One more round of bridge. You'll take my hand, Mr. Sheraton. I had to take your place until you came since I had a hand reserved for you. I have things to attend. And you, Mr. Jenkins, you can take a hand too. I shall withdraw one of my assistant-hostesses. Would you play?"

"With pleasure."

Mrs. Berely took them to a table where her daughter Betty was one of the four, ~~and~~ and nodding to one of the ladies who rose immediately,

she said: "These gentlemen, Mr. Sheraton, and Mr. Jenkins, will take mine and Miss Jablon's places." To Jenkins: "My daughter Betty, and Miss Gardner. Choose your own partners." To Miss Jablon: "You and I have business. You'll pardon us if we leave pronto." And she smiled and left with the young lady.

Jenkins, to the table in general: "I am a notoriously bad bridge-player."

"Your partner will make up for you," Betty reassured him, "she is a notoriously shrewed player."

His pretty partner gave him a nod and a smile. She was brunette, piquant and vivacious, with dark smiling eyes. Her smile warmed his chilled minister's heart, and for the first time perhaps since he could remember, he felt equal to the occasion, of entertaining a strange young lady. She made him feel at ease that quick. She dealt the first hand, and as Jenkins put out his hand to take his cards his fingers, or maybe it was one finger, touched her hand. Involuntarily the hand snapped back as if it had been shocked by an electric charge. The thrill and sensation of it! Seems he had been a confirmed bachelor since his childhood. Somehow the female species as a woman, had never entered his life. Especially since his ordainment. And now! He saw his wizened young face in the mirror of his mind and talked to it thusly: "Yes, sir; you of the freckled old visage, the bachelorhood for you. Yes sir, the wizard of your own tight little isle, like your country. That shrunk and shrinking old pachyderm of yours is quite safe from that little Cherub's well known barbs. On with the game." And now he smiled blandly though timidly, for he felt himself safe in his bachelorhood armor.

George enjoying the brief encounter winked at Betty.

Betty in a whisper to George: "O, it isn't at all what you are thinking. Your friend is made of asbestos. It'll take more than Dan's arrows to prick his hide."

"You are only a white little mouse," George said, and he took her hand. "Someday I'll... I'll..." She looked up to him in confusion and blushed to the roots of her hair.

Mrs. Berely stood on the small platform quite alone. A large, lone figure, she stood there while they were removing the card tables. She was not a lost figure, Mrs. Berely never lost herself anywhere on any occasion; she knew how and where, for instance, to put and hold her hands, or at exactly what angle to poise her head, or how much of a smile to put on her face. She never lost herself! In brief, she always was her competent and efficient self, sure of herself in an inoffensive way. She never was aggressive, even if she appeared to be, in accomplishing her objective; or compelling.

Now the center of the floor was cleared, ^{She asked} everybody to take seats, mostly on the sides near the walls.

"I have something unusual to announce to you," she said. Her voice was resonant, and round and full like her face. "I know you'll be as thrilled as I am. I wish to present George Sheraton, of Bocly, to give us a brief talk before the dance."

There was the usual applause and the not so usual; the latter came from the students of Bocly who had come on a spree and were genuinely surprised to find ^{George} there. They gave the college cheer, three rah-rahs, ending with: Speech, speech, speech!

It was a rousing welcome, and the audience turned to the section where it came from and had a good laugh. There were others who felt anxious for George, and their applause was one of encouragement. Long sustained and subdued. Among them were Cynthia and Foster, and a little fellow with everted eyelids, showing red underneath, and offering tear-like moisture. He had had George's help in physics which he had flunked once and now was taking the course again - with the sadness of misgiving.

George felt embarrassment, and a hot flush in his face as he walked the short empty space to the stage. First the clapping and then the silence annoyed him. But after the first few steps there was a determined calm on his face.

But as he eyed the audience his heart sank. Mostly they were blank faces looking up to him. Perhaps they were annoyed, impatient faces, anxious to go on with the business of the evening, fun, instead of listening to speeches. And he had chosen to talk Kant! Imbecile. His glance fell on Jenkins, sitting between Betty and the brunette who was his bridge-partner. He would talk to him. Then... then he discovered the keen face of Cynthia. Cynthia here! He had not reckoned on her being here. Why wasn't he told? By whom? Certainly it wasn't Mrs. Berely's affair. She had plenty on her hands, without thinking of trivials... Foster? But he had seen very little of him. And that was true of Cynthia. Seems as if she were trying to keep out of his way. Always he saw her either in classroom or Chapel - never alone. And then it was a nod, ~~or~~ a brief hello, the face expressionless. Like a mask. He was sure there was something... something very wrong. She was avoiding him. And he himself hadn't pressed the matter. The matter of his returned love for her. As if he had ever stopped loving her. He was sure of that now. It was a shameful interlude when he gave her up to Foster. Dilettante -- damnable! What was he thinking - the fool? It's like giving up life itself. Was he come too late to this realization? There was something forboding in the thought. It's the old story, that he never should have anything... anything that should make for happiness in his life. Now he was sure that she was lost to him. Of course, it was a busy time for her as well as himself. January is a difficult month, especially for a freshman. And he had other things. Writing, and making a living. And exams, and, and... But still... Her face was serious, her lips compressed. There was a look of grimness in her eyes, and a quality of staring, fixed constantly on him. There was wonder mingled with surprise in her eyes; anxiety and surprise! Foster's presence

at her side was bland and innocuous, as if he weren't there at all. No communication passed between the two.

He began his dissertation. He tried to make the involved theory simple and palatable, but he knew he was talking over their heads. Too late to embark on another train of thought. Even the anecdotes which were to be the oases in the arid desert of his long diatribe - to break the monotony - escaped him. He was badgered by his own instability, heckling himself. He paused, he hesitated, he stammered and slurred words. Then his eyes reverted back to where Jenkins sat, and he observed Betty eagerly. She hadn't swerved her eyes once from him, and there was such enthusiasm in her pale face. He took it for adolescent admiration of a subject which was obtuse and obviously above her understanding. ~~But~~ Even so... it was like a cool breeze on his fevered brow. But the next moment he was amazed to see the light of intelligence in her eyes that told him that her youthful agile mind was taking hold and absorbing the theory.

But above all it was to Cynthia that his attention was directed. He was communicating only with her. She was the peak, the top of the mountain, the tower on ~~Magnum~~ Hill after the school conflagration, that morning when the sky was a definite blue. Isn't that the word she had used? No, no. "Definitive" was the word. And how admirable it was, and what depth lay behind it. What a different Cynthia now! What happened in New York? If it's you, Foster, I swear...!

Suddenly he was at the end of his ~~discourse~~ discourse. He felt deflated. Weakness came over him like a wave, perspiration broke into tiny rills over his forehead, causing a blink in his eyes. But it was over, that's the main thing. There was release. He felt ^{it} in his chest, for the pressure there was gone and he could breathe quite freely.

The people are a blur. Only one face. Where is the face? But of course, there was the bulk of his hostess. Like the wall of Jericho he couldn't by-pass her. She fawned, flattered and fussed, and effusively praised his

piece. You are a liar, he said to himself, you didn't take in one single word. And she flushed and smiled benignly as if she had divined his thoughts.

The dance is on, and the echoes of his words of a moment before are dashed against the whirling couples. Or maybe they are floating between them and mingling with them. Nothing is ever lost. One never knows. A word, a seed, a germ of thought may lie dormant ever so long suddenly to awake with the flow of life, to sprout, to spread and cover the earth.

Hark, hark the breeze: the breeze has a voice as well as fragrance.

"May I have the dance with you?" a voice breathed into his ear. It was a soft melody.

Embrace me, breeze, and sing the song of spring in my heart!

The spring of all springs - my love!

Jenkins was on the floor with his bridge-partner, and George wondered at the neatness and dispatch with which he executed his steps. His face exuded peace and contentment, and the deep lines were almost non-existent. He was perpetually smiling and cooing into her ear. A new Jenkins. With an increased tempo they whirled out of sight.

Compared to him I am a drudging turtle, George thought.

He stole a glance at his partner and realized all at once that he wasn't doing so badly himself. Their dance wasn't fancy, but quite tolerable, and, it seemed to him, it had coherence and rhythm. She had her hand firm in his, and one arm tightening around his shoulder. With the gentlest of pressure - it could only be sensed but not felt - she guided his steps like a true and experienced pilot.

"I hope I am not too clumsy," he said.

"You are doing well enough," she said softly, "if you did better I'd be loathe to dance with you."

She looked up to him a bit coquettishly. She wondered at herself... her woebegone self. But still the light smirk on her face lingered, and her eyes dilated as with magic charm.

He marvelled at her.

He clenched her hand in his. His left arm tightened a little more about her waist. How close their faces, their lips! Her lips were parted in a melancholy of breathlessness. Her eyelids fluttered and closed, and a deep sigh was wrenched from her breast with anguished pain. Her eyes opened as her color came back to her face. She smiled that charming smile: "Sorry, slight indisposition."

Then Foster came to claim her.

The dance went on its merry way.

On with the dance.

The twin-sisters twisted their sinuous way. A fat couple danced belly to belly, barely gliding on the floor: often caught and jostled in the human whirlpool to the chagrin of the female partner. The male was non-chalant. He didn't care. He had a duty to perform, a pantomime which was only a corruption, or a perversion of the true dance, and he enjoyed the mere show of his dumpy legs and stubby feet. O, he could slide all right. Then the male of a married couple in their fifties, who had taken upon himself the more fanciful and increased tempo of the step, whirled by.

with every effort. He would show these youngsters that he could beat them at their own game. He was furious in the handling of his partner. He stepped forward and backward and sideways it seemed all at the same time. And she, the poor thing, had to keep up with him. O, the fury, conceit and deception of middle age! His wife looked up into his flushed face and puffing lips: "your blood pressure, my dear, watch your blood pressure!" And he: "The hell with the blood pressure. I feel just fine." Ah, for the recklessness and hopelessness of middle age! She: "Let me tell you a secret. Your eyes are starting from their sockets. Keep it up and they'll have to drag you out. Why are men such fools!"

There was a tall man, with a giraffe-like neck. He looked over the heads of all the other dancers and found his superior advantage pleasing. He could meet his partner's eye only when she craned her neck and looked up vertically to the ceiling. So small was she. He shepherded about the tiny female with ^{the} fingers of his left hand wound around the wrist of her right hand. It was like a parade to him, a game, like playing an instrument, so responsive was she to the slightest pressure, and so sensitive was her wrist to the slightest innendo of his versatile and persuasive fingers.

Click, click; tick, tick, tock; Crash! Unresting, rushing thoughts can have the light ticking qualities of a clock, or the roaring crash of a thunder clap. But the former maybe as annoying as the latter. ~~can~~ It is a slow continuous, torturing anguish and the more destructive of one's physical as well as mental equilibrium. The slow steady drop, drop, drip, drip, drip of the Oriental's cunning! With Cynthia dancing in Foster's arms she was hoping for the suddenness of the crash that would end all. The bloody flood that would drown everything - even her. The suddenness! ~~It~~ It must be sudden, and devastating. With no recourse. But since the

crash hadn't shown up, and she was and remained uncrushed, quite whole and quite able to amble about with every part of her - in the very essence and substance of her - she was relieved that the turmoil in her head had slowed and weakened to the faintest tick of the smallest and finest watch. She would hesitate and even pause in the rhythm of the step and listen. Foster ~~was~~ thought that she was just resting. The small still voice was persistent. But she could ignore it and drown it in the noise and hilarity surrounding her, and even appear gay. Then her breasts, the turgid nipples, would press lightly, ever so lightly and accidentally, against the board-like hardness of Foster's chest, and the voice would come roaring ^{back} at her. Her mind would become fertile with horror. The black, unknown fear of the horror! For a week and more now she had watched with blank gaze and dark despair the ever darkening areola of her nipples, and the engorging tumescence of her young breasts. At bedtime and on rising she had looked upon them, and they were to her like two inexorable evil things, ^{being} elemental and unremitting, growing on her very blood and substance. Irrepressible demons, growing, growing, sucking her life away. The play of the taut nipples against Foster's chest. The Danse Macabre! Had she looked into the dank open grave she would have been less puzzled than by the sense of light and frivolity surrounding her, now that George's arm was no longer sustaining her. She belonged among the cold stones, and the dark wet earth was her portion. Her eyes would start from their sockets, and she was ghastly with fright. Fright of an unknown fate!

One two, one two - the step to the rhythm of the music. The feet followed their due course. The mind was assuaged and becalmed as before a storm. For a moment she lay relaxed in Foster's arms, only her feet moving.

One two, one two, one three, three, one, one-----

The Thing swirled in circles. A mad Dervish dance. A carousing of the

evil thing that's growing within her. The Thing growing in her - in the secret (once sacred, now polluted) depths of her body. She was (slightly) benumbed, dazed, but she must dance on. She must torture her body. More effort, more exhaustion and she would throw out that thing from her insides. Yes, every step must be a strenuous step. The battle of the demon! It's he or she. Dance after dance, the battle must go on to the finish. A suddening, tightening of her insides and a searing pain! Aha, the demon is loosening his claws and is tearing her flesh in revenge. He is being exorcised. Pain, pain, the joy of pain! Was there ever a pain of greater joy? What exquisite sensuality! Pain of the menses multiplied a hundred fold. The blessing! The pain has passed like a tidal wave, but left her dry. Where is the bloody tide? Alone again she is on the deserted arid island. The battle, it must go on. And she circles round and round, and she steps high and jarring, and she is as swift as the demon within her. And she exaggerates the two-two, and the one-two, and the three. And she flops and rises, and she splits, and she throws herself around like a wild beast. A beast at bay. The last hope. The dancers' attention is attracted to her. Foster whispers into her ear: "what is it, darling!" Suddenly he is afraid. Has she gone mad? And the whole thing is a mad whirl. And the pain, it's there again. Or is it? She swoons in his arms.

CHAPTER IV

If At All You Live

If at all you live in that gray cold February morning. If at all you live when you find that nothing inside you has changed. If at all you live after that night...! The shame. The scandal!

If at all you live!