

CHAPTER IV

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

.....HIS MORAL CODE.....

It was before the hour dedicated by Dr. Capen to the slide and shuffle of the metallic basin on the metallic little service table in the healing of the indigent of their assortment of venereal afflictions that the old hobo of the doctor's lean years, returned to his office.

The light of recognition in the doctor's face delighted the hobo as he extended his hand in greeting.

"The star of my fate never dimmed in my memory," the doctor said as he I grpped his arm and pulled him towards him, "welcome, welcome to a best friend a man ever had." He held on to the hobo's arm, looking deep into his eyes. "I am only a dull and implacable healer. On the balance sheet as between you and me, you are the prince and I the pauper, Distinguished, of sterling character!"

"Sure, the hobo prince incognito!" and he laughed resoundingly in his deep baritone. "From my wanderings I often came here to look the place over- and the people. Nostalgic. As the spirit moved me. It turned out to be an evil spirit. Because I came upon an evil moment... the school....."

"Once, long ago, it was a good spirit that brought you h<sup>e</sup>re - in my office. Remember!"

"How well I remember. The very reason I hadn't come here these years. I didn't want you to remember, or make me remember. All these years, since, I remained celibate and whole. Not a peep from those little bugs that had come through that thin str<sup>e</sup>am and faint gurgle of the richly purple fluid that flowed through the tubing into the ureathra and bladder of the victim;

and the spurt and splash, as it hit the basin on its return flow. A Niagra carrying the pollution of the ages; to be dispersed, only to rise again to torment other victims."

"But it's not all a Niagra of pollution," said the doctor, "there are good streams that flood the fields in early spring and the germs that feed us."

"And on us!" snickered the hobo as he slapped himself a resounding blow on the wide expanse of his chest. "Sure, sure! They feed on us and we feed on them. There is a sense of rhythm to this thing," he said in mock seriousness towering over Dr. Capen. "That painful massaging of the prostate is a thing of the past - a long past! Cleansed he thinks he is, and lo and behold soon the performance is repeated again. The next day and the next, and so on. Until.... Who knows until when? The mute question of the ages, since creation. For no sooner healed when he'd contact the belligerent cocci again, and embrace and imbibe them again. For this is life. And those putrid little animals - nature's smallest carnivora - have to live. Man makes an admirable host. He and they have a common goal - the organization and continuity of life. Specialization! Man is host to untold unit-cells of his own - making-up the tissues and mechanism that is man; and so the association with the germ world, the kinship, is rather a close one. The latter, in Nature's economy scheme, are the little darlings. For they are self-sufficient 'wholes', while man is an is an "unholy" waste of such myriads of 'Wholes'."

"You think very little of mankind," the doctor ventured.  
don't

"I, think less of myself," the prodigal's lips curled into a faint smile as he (stared at) the doctor, "and maybe more, because once I fulfilled Nature's regarded  
..avowed purpose and intent to become the lavish host to the germ world--- for they are more efficient, more important in Nature's long term Time-schedule than their host. And who knows but that when Man's role as a host is finished that he may vanish from the earth!"

"The new theory of sepsis versus asepsis," Dr. Capen laughed, "throw the theories of Pasteur and Ehrlich to the germs. Viva, the world of Germs!"

He took the hobo's arm, looking straight into his eyes, "you are surmising too much, my friend. Don't judge man by your own example. But whatever your pet peeve, I am very happy to see you."

"Tut, tut, my good man," the other retorted good-naturedly, a broad smile filtering down from the great height of his shining eyes upon the head of Dr. Capen, "tut, tut, my good doctor, how much do you know of man in his habitat, debased habitat, if you will, in his state of scorn, his debauchery?" He braced himself, holding his head high as if to deliver himself of some weighty pronouncement. "As a physician you see man with a compassionate eye in his degradation. To you he comes with his ills like any sick animal, but there is a difference. While the animal is innocent of all evil, living by instinct alone, man most often is not. He has been given the freedom of choice - free will - but most often he chooses evil. Evil passion! Why? I may as well ask you why all the plagues have descended on man. Why? Since conscientious Time began we asked the same question. Job asked it. Why? Protest to the little animals, the microbes, who invade our bodies! But I don't protest. I welcome the little savages so long as my carcass can feed them. Sometime - in the long or short future - they'll finish me. Us! The latter a novel experience. An experience in nothingness - if one can experience nothingness." He took a turn about the room, gazed through the office window at the milling crowd. "I blew into town in an evil moment, during the fire, to watch the gleaming eye of an old loved one pleading for mercy, to be saved from an ignominious death. Stunned I gazed with an unseeing eye. Was it a delusion?"

"No aberration of the mind," said Dr. Capen, "no delusional insanity to think of the school as a dying being. The school building of our youth, yours and mine. A trick of the mind maybe, but a normal mind. It's the strong mind, the proper, that is favored. Hence the uncanniness of your philosophy of nothingness, and the little scavengers who will devour us 'in the short or long distant future'. Yes, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity', saith Kheleth, "

but he also said, 'And the spirit returneth ~~to~~ unto God who gave it', <sup>gh)</sup> <sup>to dust.</sup> even though the body returns. Man's hope is salvation. And not only because man gets old and is Alone, and is seeking the grave, but because seeking the grave he sees Salvation. It's a fearsome thing to seek the grave in advance of the years, yet it has a nostalgic quality. The most dreaded things have in them the magic power of magnetic attraction, even of fascination. Man is fascinate<sup>d</sup> by his tragic end."

"Salvation will come in another world," the hobo countered, "in this world man is too evil. And Man is alone because in the next hour, or any hour, or any day, he won't even be a lonely lookout on the mountain peak under the sky, but in the earth - rotting away alone. And all his prading on earth won't even be a memory - a folly memory. Because the very strutting and parading, the game at war, the kill, the murder, is because he is alone. He rips, rapes and ravages in his fury of loneliness; he outbrutes the brute because the brute - the beast - has no fear in him, he has not lost a soul. He is not alone. Man kills in the multitude<sup>s</sup> because he is alone - with his fate. The greater the torture, the greater the sham - the greater the recompense.

"In the midst of his murders his body is to lie, a hero.

"The Grand Delusion, stifling all reason in a deluge of unreason. The Crusaders, the heroes - the cry for war!

"War, war, war, for God and country. Any God, any country. All countries!

"The hero, the patriot!

"But the hero and the coward both walk the earth alone - in the grand finale, which is the awakening and final Delusion. For their eyes turn and see nothing. The earth opens up and swallows them, hero and coward --- covering their folly, inscribing zero for their effort on TIME'S TOMB!"

"In Time's Womb?" the doctor looked up to him.

"Isn't it the same?" came a voice as from a distance.

and coward - covering their folly, inscribing zero for their effort on Time's Tomb!"

## CHAPTER V

### A Dedicated Hour

~~Later, that afternoon~~

Dr. Capen's reception room was full to capacity, as if patients from far and near had gotten together and made a concerted effort to overwhelm him with work in this hour he had dedicated to his friends of his lean years. And today of all days! And his hobo-friend, turning up in time to hold his work of the hour in abeyance. <sup>And</sup> Mrs. Forrest who had to see him privately before the "hour"! His ~~friend~~ hobo, now Bob Black, had come just after she had left through that special exit, the unobtrusive, almost invisible door, in the rear of the office. He wondered if he had seen her come out. But <sup>friend</sup> this was tight lipped, never saying a word about it. And he hadn't asked.

He looks at the clock. Half past four. Every time he opens the door to let one in into the treatment room he is horrified at the horde in the waiting room.

The evening paper is spread out on a chair; the black letters of a headline telling of George's triumph play tricks on his eyes, leaping at him. But he must keep at his task.

Next!

Come, come, come! Step faster. Faster!

If they'd only hurry. But they take their time.

You may leave your hat there. No need going back for it. And you, my dear lady, your handbag is quite safe in the waiting room. Why come in with your topcoat? All right, let it be.

Will he be through by the time George gets here?