

CHAPTER II

A Summer Lyric

Blanca, the frolicksome sorcery of full lusty summer.

Cynthia, the lyric expectancy and magic hope of spring, the poetic moodiness of a soft summer evening.

This is full summer. The expectancy and hope of spring already in full fruition. The tree, sturdy and proud with fullness of life's juices, is in full bloom, bearing the seed of its perpetuation; the corn-stalk, its head aloft in majestic dignity, already is feeling within its fibres the power of its bursting kernels; the meadow in its lustiest colors of full red, full green, pale -green, pale-rose, pale-yellow and lavender and white. A delicate pure white! The soil already passionate with the sponginess of fertility and bearing, of rebirth and growth.

The insect buzzes its act of procreation; the bird flutters its wings and pumps its feathers in the same act; and in man the turgid stream of life's juices flows with ever greater rush. The act of adaptability toward progression!

George is an old-young tree, with gnarled roots, with sappling twigs and young leaves, and a revolving cycle of continual rejuvenation.

From old you are firmly rooted in the soil of your progenitors, George, but from the ground up you are very young. You are not a Don Quixote chasing the wind. You are normally sane. Perhaps too sane to suit your liking. One can't dream and be sane (wholly sane) at the same time.

Oh, you can dream and see a shadow in the moon, even in the bright sun of noon. And the shadow may materialize into the willowy form of Blanca, but you'll say the creation is too realistic, so much in bold relief, with all its faults and revelations. And you say to yourself it couldn't be. It couldn't be love, because you see too clearly, too much - with all the mystery gone. What is love, then? Can love be rationalized? Is love realism, sanity; or a false illusion, an insanity! Your mind is split in the middle - the strangely analytical, and the illusory. That's what makes for uncertainty, when you would stand firm. And when the will doesn't match your physical stamina of the self. When the will, which is part of that self, becomes a Will o' the wisp, an evil genius, to torment you. And you go on analyzing and say: Love is but a yearning, a desire; or a yearning that materializes in desire. Too obvious for you, George.

Is it Cynthia, then! In Cynthia you see a halo that doesn't materialize. You cannot touch or tame a moonbeam!

The last of the sudden flashes of brilliant colors that punctuated the starry sky was fading, the last thunderous roar was receding to the far horizons, and the great mob of people ^{were} turning homeward from the great spectacle of Fourth-of-July-fireworks on Eastern Promontory.

Blanca and George, Cynthia and Foster, and the somewhat superfluous Harold were one group among those watching the celebration. During most of the time George had ~~had~~ Blanca to himself, his left arm encircling her, leaning against the terraced iron fence, watching the dazzling show reflected in the calm waters of the bay below. He pressed her harder to him as he felt the nearness of her vibrant pliant body. His arm was tight around her, his hand, resting on the rail, cupped the curve of her ^{firm} young breast. Instinctively their cheeks touched; a little harsh intake of breath; a little gasp from Blanca's lips, as he felt her hot breath on his left ear. Instinctive love, love materialized in one's

yearning, George thought; love by indirection, but not dishonestly come by. Love inexplicable, love enforced by Nature's design to further the process of adaptability. Adaptability that makes the universe turn on its axis.

A cooling breeze came up from below, there was a restlessness in the air as the mass of people stirred, and Blanca and George turned to join the rest of their group.

They were discussing an outing for the next day when they fell in stride with Lena and Solomon homeward bound.

Blanca suggested a trip to Old Orchard in her Franklin. She very much wanted to show off her skill at the "wheel". She had been told that she looked handsome behind the wheel --- straight as a virgin goddess. But of what use if one can't show off before one's friends. And Blanca was a high spirited young woman. But Harold dared counsel otherwise. A cycling

trip through the countryside. And that he would supply "cycles" to those who needed them. Blanca raised her eyebrows in surprise as well as in disgust. Had he dared! The slave risen against the master! But for once Harold had dared to overcome his meekness before Blanca. George quickly seconded Harold's motion. George of all people. And minutes before, he... ! She flashed him a bitter glance of mockery. "You fiend!" she muttered to herself as she turned and gazed at the lowly Harold. There was silence all around. But that, which wouldn't let her come to a definite decision and oppose the two of them, and perhaps carry the day, was the puzzle of George's sudden turn about to go over to Harold's side.

Perhaps George wasn't quite clear himself as to the reason why he took that attitude which was in direct defiance of Blanca's expressed wish. He may have had many reasons of which he was not at the moment completely aware, but which added up to one thing - that he had no intention to be subjugated to anyone, and Blanca could be domineering. These were his formative years, and he must remain free. He enjoyed the play between Harold and Blanca, as an interested spectator.

Maybe he wanted Harold to win in this little skirmish, and not to stand alone in her scorn. Harold would serve as a buffer between him and Blanca and would not ^{let} him get too involved.

The Dreens were invited to join in the jaunt, but only Lena accepted. She thought it a splendid opportunity to renew acquaintance with an old friend, the art of bicycling. Mr. Dreen thought he would look clumsy, if not ridiculous, on one of those things, with his height and bulk. He was let out of the arrangement.

Ahoy, ahoy drive and turn,
Push, paddle and churn,
And the dust will burn;
But do not concern,
Home you will return,
If toil thou not spurn.

The morning was clear, but the sun lacked brilliance. High overhead there were cirrus clouds, liquid, translucent and thin, but with promise of thickening. There was the sense and smell of moisture in the air.

"Rather cool for a July morning," Harold observed as he came out to welcome the group, "but better than the glaring hot sun for riding."

"But it'll be humid too for a July morning," Blanca mocked him in her airy manner, "July is not October."

This was a clear indication that she hadn't forgiven his ^{ing}subordination of the evening before. She was hard and implacable. It would be bad if the weather were going to be hot, but indications are it'll be cool. But no matter what the weather, Harold felt that it was better this way than have her drive them around in her car. She'd probably find her way alone with George. Like last night! Even in his dreams he saw them nuzzling and muzzling. But if this is a play (which he was sure it was) he'll soon take "the ~~the~~ part". Blanca ultimately would be his. He was thus assured by his night long calculation.

"But have you noticed those fleecy little clouds high up there?" he

her
mimicked Blanca.

If he hadn't been awake most of the night pursuing those black dreams about Blanca and George he might not have been so forward and daring in antagonizing Blanca again. Of course it's brave for the worm to turn and for the slave to become master, but Blanca is still Blanca and he'd rather die than lose her. But the dreams of the previous night beset him, and set his mind in confusion, and there in the confusion and haze there was a bright spot, and in that clear circle he and Blanca were together. Alone! But then the dark dream returned, and he sees shadowy forms of Blanca and George in the restless night. Perhaps uncertain and grotesque figures riding undulating black waves, yet in a halo of loveliness and serenity - in various poses of passion and proximity, and again in the calm and equanimity of dissembled bodies in the Garden. (The Garden of Eden? Yes, the story of Adam and Eve had occurred to him last night before supper. He remembers it well now. The Garden of Eden then.) Nude bodies but chaste. The olive nudity of Blanca! He had only seen a bare arm, or maybe a nude leg from the knee down, when her stocking rolled down after a swim, or when she had deliberately and daringly neglected to put the stockings on. He could reconstruct the rest of the image from an arm or leg. The dream-mind is a lively and imaginative culprit, and very adroit. Now they are still together and he sees them with undreaming eyes. But he doesn't feel the slightest twinge of jealousy. As if he were witnessing a play, the development of the plot and the denouement of which he knew. And he was there at the end, standing on the pinnacle of success - and Blanca was his. Blanca was his, and he dared.

"But had you noticed those fleecy clouds...?" Had he ever dared to speak up to Blanca before? He is playing a part for real now. Words came to him as from a void, cathedral like in their reverberations, but they came from somewhere deep within him. But he is practical. Through all this shadowy darkness one thing had came clear to him. His future. And it was in his grasp, and dangling from it was Blanca. And this future

is in wait for him in a small garage, just a bit off the main business section. He had seen it a week or two before, but he hadn't grasped its possibilities until the wakeful hours of last night. Or was it in the shadowy dreams that it ^{had} came to him? The garage though run down was not beyond repair. And it could be had for cheap. One speaks of lightning events that might influence one's entire life. Well, that was the moment and the event - the garage. His first stepping stone. The garage business is in its infancy. He'll be on the ground floor. With his mechanical bent, and his business acumen, he is just the guy who'll go places. Thank you, George, You may have been an unwitting, perhaps unwilling means, a cause, a prompter - a link in the chain of events that may... Oh, well! And you, Blanca, with your uppish airs - you'll be mine. Mine! "You know, Blanca," cajoling, grinning widely, as if imparting superior knowledge to her, "you know, those clouds are what are called cirrus clouds. They carry the portents of rain in their wings; but not until later. In fact much later. A perfect morning for bicycling."

She glared at him half-contemptuously. The other half not quite sure what to make of it. His superior tone, his self-assurance, not at all the old submissive Harold. Never before had he acted in that manner.

"Phooy, I could have sworn it was George speaking, only for the voice," she snapped at him. "Now, where did you get all this superior knowledge?" Her fine delicate nostrils were quivering, the tip of her nose blanched in the pale daylight with righteous indignation.

But Harold didn't wilt before her scorching scorn. He looked her straight in the eye, and stood his ground firmly. Not the old meek little Harold. Old and so long ago, he said to himself, This is a younger and more irascible Harold, more prone to anger and the counterattack. You'll find out soon enough, my dear Blanca. Come on and storm, little wind. Little wind is correct, Blanca. You might appear a big blow now, but to me you are still a fragrant breeze - to be put in my pocket. Later! But

the taming begins now.

"Time, time, Blanca," he said.

"Don't pull that George stuff on me," she warned him.

"No mystery," Harold said. He would have wished to imply and to clarify that "time" was on his side, and that in time she would be his, but he said, "I am only talking in clear terms of time. Although cloudy, it'll be clear and comfortable for our little expedition."

"The farmer's almanac," George said half in irony. "But how come the farmer on Pacific street?" It was a poor pun and even a poorer jest on a friend. Harold was his friend, even though he only half admitted it, and even though it was only in a circuitous way. He needed Harold. He was a buffer, a wall, that protected him from Blanca's orbit of radiation, ~~but he was not a farmer~~ "What I meant, Harold, was that you are as good as a farmer's almanac even though you live in the city, and are quite right in your prognostication of the weather."

"Some more phooey," as Blanca turned away in disgust, "wonder who corrupts who?"

"Whom!" George was teasing.

"A tiresome pair the both of you," she sputtered, as she went over to where Lena stood with her son.

It was the first time Blanca had classified him with George. Beaming, Harold said, "Wait and see what I got for you, Blanca."

Harold disappeared into the interior of the house; and a few minutes later he came out wheeling a bicycle of such beauty and design that hardly anyone in the group had ever beheld before. The massive chrome-fittings and the whirling spokes ^ewere aglitter with reflected light-rays even in the morning's murky haziness. It was a theme, in its very essence, of graceful forward motion; of foreign import. Standing there it was an animate ~~something~~ ^{life and} something, full of eagerness to go, giving off a soft lustre from its metallic soul. Blanca stood agape, gazing at the shining thing, her face inscrutable. "Why this - this!" she marveled.

"It's quite nice," Harold admitted, as he looked up to Blanca with smiling eyes. Even the calculating and usually-boasting Harold betrayed a quivering emotion and a meekness in his voice. The visible effect it had on all and especially on Blanca had a sobering and mellowing influence on him. "It has a new gear system," he said with pride, anxious to display his mechanical expertness. "You can coast^s with safety and precision downhill and climb uphill with much less effort by just shifting gears. It has also a much more efficient breaking system."

Blanca took a^{close} look at him. Not bad looking. The swarty pudginess of his face took on the glow of his inner emotion.

Graciously she accepted the loan of the machine and sat down in the ample and springy saddle, displaying a well shaped calf. But because of the novelty of the thing and the excitement, her first attempt to wheel around in a circle ended in a spill, which was no more damaging than the flaring of her skirts to the hip, to the exhilaration of some and dumbfoundedness of the others. It bothered Blanca not at all. Getting up quickly she dusted herself, and announced she was ready if the others were.

Georgé said: "On this you can guide us in the dark. Really it's a most astounding machine."

There was no rancor in George's voice. If Harold was getting a share of Blanca's affection so much the better, he thought. His own future was so uncertain, and with a lot of "ifs". And there was Cynthia.

They crossed the bridge to South Portgrave in swift motion. It was a piece of handsome roadway, with a parapet of white-gray cement-work on either side, the roadbed itself a smooth black asphalt. They rode six abreast until they reached the narrow country-side roads, when they split into two groups; the men in the vanguard, the women following.

They turned left toward the fields and cemeteries. It was a sparsely traveled and lonely road. The buzzing of the insects in the tall nodding

grass and the whistling of the birds in the swaying branches, the mid-summer cloying humid air, gave George a feeling of unreality and nostalgia. It was unclear to him this sensitiveness, this perceptiveness, but it appealed to him. It suited the semi-translucent sky, and the foreboding stillness in the air. The cemetery air, the smell and sense of cemetery grass! Things growing in cemeteries had a special scent to them, as if from a different world. Befitting those who lie under the sod, whose spirits rise and roam the upper worlds. A limpid effluvium of decay, it is distilled into an unearthly ethereal substance.

At Lagonia, the last stop before The Oaks where they would have their picnic-lunch, they crowded around a refreshment stand for cool drinks.

Foster sat sober and demure. George looking up from his drink said: "What's eating you, Foster, aren't you having a good time?"

"As long as you have one," Foster snapped back at him.

"Something is upsetting you," Lena said taking her son's hand, "what is it, dear?"

"Tell her, Foster," Cynthia urged. But as Foster remained stubbornly silent, she went on: "All right I'll tell your mother. It's this, Mrs. Dreen. Foster overheard his grandfather bidding for the old Emporium Theatre so Mr. Dreen would not get it. Foster couldn't decide whether to tell his stepfather and betray his grandfather, or keep silent and see Mr. Dreen lose his opportunity. It worries him."

"Oh, that, darling," Mrs. Dreen laughed, that's gone and forgotten. It's very sweet of you..." And she kissed him.

"Even I know that," George spoke up. "While Mr. Forrest was haggling over a hundred dollars Mr. Black got it, and promptly hand^{ed} it over.... But this is still top secret."

"I am glad..." Cynthia started to say, but clapped a hand to her mouth. She wondered how Foster would take it.