

CHAPTER IV

Tonight and After

"Tonight and After" has not the ominous connotation of "Tomorrow and After", which might mean eternity, George thought. It does not weigh heavily on one's conscience. At its worst it's only a parting for a short time after tonight. Time which is always of the essence cannot change much here in the short period of six months. He'll be back with his mother in six months, or sooner. Nevertheless a parting it is. Like a ship leaving the calm waters of its home port, and facing the vastness of sea. There may be gales of storm ahead. To George, especially, what lay ahead was an uncharted course, because he had never been away from home before.

"Tonight" had another significance to George. Tonight, before the farewells are over, Solomon will ^{have} read his play brought forth with the collaboration of Solomon and Bob Black

They were all there, except the new Mrs. Forrest and Bob Black. It was better so, thought George. Recently, rumors of an affair between the two had been bruited about town, and their presence might be embarrassing to Foster. Bob Black as usual had been direct: "I shall not be there," he told George.

George looked about the parlor where they were all sitting. It was furnished with the old overstuffed velour chairs and sofa, lining the walls. In the center there was the round walnut table. Ordinarily surrounded by its own coterie of chairs, standing at muster, it now stood bare and orphaned, scattered and its legion occupied by the guests. An ancient Wilton was spread over the length of the room, leaving

open spaces at the sides where the oak flooring showed. A bit shabby, but scrupulously clean. His poor mother. It always irked him when he thought of his mother's hard labors. Slave labor! Secretarial work days and ^{keeping} house-nights! How long, how long --- ? Did he have a right to refuse Mr. Barton's offer? But suppose Mr. Barton knew of their stringent finances, wouldn't it be an act of charity rather than --- rather than...?

He looked across the room to where Cynthia was sitting between Lena and Foster. She seemed contented, only occasionally he caught her eye as she glanced at him. He had hardly been alone with her the past few months. Always it was a matter of editorial policy, or an assignment for the school magazine, or the Year Book. He wasn't sure whether it was he or she who kept their distance. Foster was his intimate friend. She was good for him in this, Foster's life of uncertainty and confusion. Maybe the reason was Blanca whom he had been seeing much lately.

"I say, what's this writing business good for?" Mr. Samuel Dervin addressed himself to no one in particular. His eyes were bent downward, his chin almost on his chest. His voice had some of its usual gruffness, but tinged with a jocular triviality in a brave attempt to please the little gathering that had come to say a last word to George before leaving for college-town, Wheelport, next day. Then, as if in answer to his own question, he ventured the further illuminating observation, thus: "All in all it's a poor man's business no matter how you figure it. And you can take it from me, the doctor-business is not much better." The last was said in a lower tone of voice, almost a whisper, in deference to Dr. Capen, who was present. Mr. Dervin looked up to Dr. Capen, across the table, his eyes smiling under his bushy eyebrows and said benignly, "of course, Dr. Capen, you are the exception." He owed that much to the good doctor who had removed his gall-bladder so recently and had left ^{him} in such excellent condition, of mind as well as body, as witness Mr. Dervin's long monologue, most

unusual for him.

"But my good Samuel," Dr. Capen humored him, "I can assure you that my case is no different...."

"Well, at the beck and call of any Tom, Dick and Harry," Samuel persisted. In his stubbornness he had forgotten to tame and modulate his voice. Then a last thrust: "Slavery, that's all it amounts to. In business you are your own".... Here he caught a withering glance from Blanca's eye, and shut up like a clam.

Through her father's long eloquence, Blanca sat in wonderment and even admiration. It was rare for her father to put two sentences together. A gruff word or two... And now! Well, maybe his gall-bladder was the reason. And now being rid of it he had become - a different man! But then she detected the beginning of the familiar growl in his voice and ~~she~~ began to fear the consequences of his unbridled tongue.

To cover up an embarrassing moment she said: "To my father there is nothing like business - especially the fruit and vegetable business." Having said this she smiled to him, to show him she bore him no ill will.

But Mr. Dervin, mistaking her intent, ventured another comment, "Well, it did good by me," looking in the direction of George, "right now there is a dandy opening in my place for a bright young man."

"Father!" Blanca scowled.

She looked toward her mother, as if for an answer to her father's last outburst. Had he lost all reason to give out in public that he wished for George as his son-in-law! Only a year ago he had said of George that he was a good-for-nothing, that his head was in the sky and his feet treading the clouds. But her mother was non-committal, her face as blank as cold marble

The face of George's mother, her aunt, was equally immobile, a light smile playing about her lips, as if she had enjoyed the spectacle as a

mere bystander. Had she known of her father's intentions before hand?

George sat gaunt and silent as if the whole thing didn't concern him at all. Blanca turned to him. She knew that look on his face. She was sure he hadn't even heard her father, what with the strain of graduation and this farewell party to which he objected.

Then she saw with astonishing fascination the paleness leave his face, and putting his hand gently on her father's arm she heard him say: "It's nice to know you have an uncle who has a place for you in case..." He hesitated, "in case things don't go well. I should like the stimulating atmosphere of the free give-and-take of the business world. It has its advantages. But as of this moment, uncle, I am a slave. You called it right.

'Slave' is the word. Slave to ambition, maybe. To tread the clouds, as you again once correctly sized it up. And you are right from your point of view - as a hard and solid business man. But as you know in my clan there hardly ever were any sound business men. Mostly they trafficked in the business of the spirit. I am the last of the line, and seemingly can't do much about it. That is to change the trend. Who knows but that someday I might come begging to take me into your world - the world of fruit and vegetables.

And here is another reason." Pointing to Solomon who now stood up with a loose-leaf manuscript in his hands, "Mr. Dreen there has something which the two of us have written, and he wants to read it. Would you stay, uncle?"

"Another one of those d--- " he muttered. Then in a mild tone, catching Blanca's eye, "Sorry, George, in my business ^{we} have to be up with the dawn - the wholesale market!"

"A bit of a slave yourself - to the wholesalers," George chuckled. "Well, good night, uncle. And if I don't see ^{you} again before I leave, the best of luck."

Mr. Dervin smiled under his thick mustache. Suddenly, as he arose, he grasped George's hand. "Best nephew I ever had. The only one." There was

clapping of hands all around. The plodding bear turned into a sly fox!

Foster looked bored. "I hope he leaves soon," he said to his mother.

"I can hardly wait to hear the play," Cynthia said, "with your husband reading it'll surely be a treat."

"I hope so, if only for George's sake," Lena blushed. She looked to where George's mother was sitting and nodded with a smile of recognition and assurance. Mrs. Sheraton smiled a motherly smile to her.

After Mr. and Mrs. Dervin had left, they all trooped into the kitchen, where chairs had been placed in a ^esemi-circle, a small table in the gap, to serve as a reader's stand. The kitchen was more spacious and well lighted.

George sat alone in a semi-darkened corner, looking away from where the others sat, as if he hadn't dare ^d look at anyone while the child spanned by his brain was being exposed to public view. He wondered at the words as he heard them from Solomon's lips. They weren't his! At least he couldn't remember them as being the same he had written. Do all words in a play come to a different life in the mouth of the actor? They were alive and thrilling as well as exhausting. Had he really written those heroic words that now poured out from Solomon's mouth?

He looked at Cynthia's pert ^{lovely} ~~little~~ face lifted to Solomon - a radiant face - her eyes shining with the great emotion that was in her. He turned his glance to Blanca, her mouth pursed, her eyes staring into a void in the room. He drew a blank.

Could there ^{be} doubt as to which of the two?

But life isn't that simple. Who knows about Tomorrow, and especially After!