

THE ANSWERER

BY

GRANT OVERTON

The singers do not beget—only the Poet begets;

*The singers are welcom'd, understood, appear often enough—
but rare has the day been, likewise the spot, of the birth of
the maker of poems, the Answerer . . .*

He has the pass-key of hearts . . .

*What can be answer'd he answers—and what cannot be
answer'd, he shows how it cannot be answer'd:*

He is the Answerer.



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TO VISIT
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For
ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN

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NOTE: I had intended to offer here what I conceive justifies the large liberties taken with the known and unknown facts of several lives; but now I see how futile that must be. Either there is justification or there is none, and, if there is, the reader will derive it for me from the work itself; otherwise, all stands condemned. For extenuation is not enough. . . . My aim is to communicate feeling; my material is partly history, my method is fiction. I have hoped, as the fused result, to achieve essential truth.

GRANT OVERTON.

Patchogue, Long Island, New York.
1920-1921.

THE ANSWERER

PART ONE
A MIRACLE IN FIFTH MONTH

I

It was, oh, so fine a morning—so clean, sweet, bright; with the thick sand of the country road compacted by early showers. The young man who sauntered along (springiness a-plenty in each leisured footfall) stopped again and again to take deep breaths. The breeze stirred his thick, black, lustrous hair. Broad shoulders, well-squared, proportioned his good height. A carelessly adjusted suit of homespun hung as if ready at a twitch to uncover the Greek symmetry of satin'd flesh and muscle. But the soul of this young man was in the eyes he lifted from the road to the blue and white heaven—gray-blue eyes as direct as the day.

The day was April's, or Fourth Month's, but the hour was his own, he told himself. He cried out his perfect possession of it, dwelt upon its wonder; in a loud voice, half-shouted, half-sang:

“Sunshine: grass, the mark of earth's annual adolescence: tender-budding sprouts of trees: air which quickens the sap and the blood—you're all a part of myself! And I am some part of *you!* To eternity! Eternity? Why, it's *now!* There's nothing worthier than all this, I guess, to be eternal!”

He was silent; then went on, aloud:

“You’re mine, you living, beautiful world! But you’re any one’s who goes forth. You’re a child’s as much as a man’s; yes, more than a man’s! I—it’s hard to get that said right; said full, complete, up to the hilt! If a fellow could say that right what a poet he’d be! Oh . . . I wish I could say it! Not just to utter something pretty sounding but to let the truth, the beauty, the wonder of all living breathe out in words, be triumphantly voiced!”

He swung his arms in an awkward, enthusiastic gesture of liberation. He began to speak, measuredly, in a rhythm which varied the monotony of his easy walking gait.

“There was a—child—went forth—each day,
 And the objects he looked upon, stirring wonder, love,
 Each and every object he saw, that thing he became . . .
 For a day, for an hour, for centuries lived in an instant.
 The earliest lilacs, the swelling grass, the bird singing,
 The young lamb just born in Third Month, all became part
 of him
 And he a part of them, with wonder—and pity—and love . . .”

His headshake had no trace of impatience, seemed to denote only an imperfect satisfaction; the sigh which followed was brimmed with happiness. “I am not born yet,” he consoled himself.

Life begins, may be lived and end before birth. Birth? That is either an accident or a miracle, perhaps both (he thought)—almost certainly both! But this day is for living! Seven or seventy, or thrice seven (my own age on a nearing anniversary), birthed or unbirthed, young animal or creature leading a merely vegetative existence, there reposes on me, Walt Whitman, no duty, no burden of obligation of any sort. The world, or womb, of Outdoors encloses

me, invites me to feed and grow; nourishes, protects me, encourages my tiny stirrings and, no doubt, rejoices in them, rejoices that the child quickens this day (so bright! so sweet!) of Fourth Month. . . .

The road, winding between two hillsides, unfolded upon a valley checkered with a pattern in young wheat and plowed soil and moving undulantly to the feet of the Long Island hills. In the foreground, on a little rise, in a clearing among slender white-oaks, stood the schoolhouse, small, oblong, with little-paned windows and a hood over the bell. For all its paintless boards, the weathered little edifice had the air of a citadel, and gave forth a suggestion of consolidating, somehow, the common interest of scattered and isolated lives—humble lives that had yet a collective import and a ponderable sum. When, in the fresh, sparkling morning, the small iron bell oscillated under its hood, sending a thin clang-clang! across to the forested hillsides, it seemed as if the valley were speaking, as if a voice were reciting the creed which inspired the dwellers on half a hundred random farms. Women busy in wide kitchens or scattering corn for hungry fowls sometimes paused a moment, listening to the sound of the distant bell; but the men hoeing in the fields, protected by broad-brimmed hats from the sun's blaze and mounting heat, went impassively on with their work, hearing but unheeding.

The first stroke would cause boys and girls along the upland road to stop a game of leap-frog or to clutch with sudden firmness the shoes and stockings they were carrying. Mr. Whitman, the teacher, had arrived at the schoolhouse. He would ring for perhaps five minutes and then

wait tolerantly for maybe five minutes more. When you're young it ain't so awful hard to run a mile, with panting lapses, in ten minutes; but when time must be taken to put on shoes and stockings, fifteen minutes is lots better. Attendance in school barefoot isn't sanctioned; on the other hand, a pair of shoes is a costly article, made to measure and obtainable only once a year when the traveling cobbler comes by the farm.

However, Mr. Whitman—or "Walt" as all the boys called him—was always easy with you. He never birched. Some of the older boys had made a mistake about him at the beginning of the winter term—when farmwork was done and fathers were reluctantly acceding to mothers' demands for more schoolin' for the eldest. Yes, some of the older boys had mistaken Teacher's mild, kind of easy-goin' way, and offered to wrestle him.

One after another he had downed the three sons of Free-gift Terry so there had been no time for the geography lesson that morning. And afterward he had shaken hands with the Terry boys, all except the youngest his own age or older and all as tall and heavy as himself. And the oldest Terry had said: "You're Teacher, Mr. Whitman!" and Mr. Whitman had answered: "Call me Walt; and all you boys and girls just forget I'm Teacher and remember we're all of us out to learn something! School's dismissed. Everybody, shoo!" Then the youngest Terry had rung the bell so hard the rope broke.

How Walt had laughed! But he was always ready to laugh, and he joined in all their games with the boys and seemed mostly to hate going indoors. All through the cold

of winter, with heavy snows, at least one window had been kept open in the schoolroom; though owing to the attitude of parents, Walt had to ask the class not to say anything, home, about the window. The class agreed, liking the touch of mischief though indifferent to Walt's new-fangled idea about something he called "ventilation." Nobody knew what ventilation was, but Walt said it sharpened your senses just as study sharpened your mind. Anyway, the stove in the middle of the schoolroom, kept redhot with wood the boys had stacked against the back wall clear up to the ceiling, threw out a steady warmth; you could always move up closer to it.

Winter was by; this was the time of spring plowing and planting. The three Terrys and all of the older boys were dropping out to renew the work of the farm. Even the younger children would be needed "to home" in a few weeks; school was practically over. It was hard to go indoors, harder to stay there; and Walt had a way of asking, with a laugh: "Well, boys and girls, shall we have a recitation or a recess-itation?" He was always joking, kind of!

So ran the youthful summary, often recapitulated, lightly touched upon, a point here and an instance there as the pupils, coming by ones, twos and threes out of the valley, gradually coalesced, mornings, on the school road, where it turned off from the Smithtown road just above Rumsey Platt's store. Sometimes Teacher Walt, a little later than usual, would come swinging along, and finding all the nine boys and seven girls fore-gathered, would cry: "Going to let Mr. Platt teach ye to-day?" At the sound of their

mirth Rumsey Platt would appear in the door, which opened on a high stoop reached by fourteen steps—a gaarled old man past eighty who, as a lad of eighteen, had taken part in the disastrous battle of Long Island, falling a prisoner to the British bloodycoats. With bright, unwinking eyes the storekeeper would look over the lot of them, not a muscle of his lean face moving, though in some mysterious way he was all the time chawing his tobacco. A silence would fall; then, ejecting suddenly from the corner of his mouth some of the delectable juice, Rumsey Platt would exclaim, his voice a quavery treble:

“Go 'long and larn, yo' uns! When I was your age, I was larned with a bagonet!”

This contrast and striking reminiscence elicited, invariably, a full moment of respectful silence and regard. The veteran slipping inside the store after a brief glance at the weather, a buzz would rise as the group moved schoolward—one of the older boys was telling, for the *n*th time, of seeing the livid streak made by the blade of the Britisher's bayonet, grazing ol' Rumsey Platt's arm, back in '76. An' in '12, though nigh onto sixty, he'd been a cap'n in the m'litia. . . .

Thus on many a morning; but not on this glorious day and morning of April, 1840. Passing Platt's Store, striding along the up-road, Walt came upon none of the youngsters. The circumstance went unremarked, for his thoughts were elsewhere; but when he reached the schoolhouse the slight oddity of encountering no one, of finding no pupil already on hand, caught his attention.

He grasped the rope and the bell, like a voice reciting an immutable and simple gospel, sent its unchanging intonation floating over the valley.

After several moments he rested, looking down the road. It was empty. Of a sudden he laughed aloud and heartily, the laugh dying into a succession of chuckles. So this was the windup! Even his two eight-year-olds hadn't put in an appearance.

"Hurrah!" Teacher, liberated from school, turned a handspring at the edge of the road in front of the schoolhouse. With a last truant glance along the deserted road, Walt climbed a boundary ditch on the farther side of the highway and struck off, in a rambling fashion, through the woods to the south, on the side away from the valley.

2

Later he would return, of course, for there were a few personal belongings—clothes, a notebook and two or three books—at Freegift Terry's farm, his last sojourning-place in the routine of boarding round. Then he wanted to see again young Freegift Terry, two years his junior and the third of the farmer's three sons. Besides the old people and the three boys, there was only Esther, about seventeen. The farmer would also be looking for him sooner or later to pay him the \$20 currency due and payable for the teacher's services since the first of the year. . . . However, all that could wait. He must leave the valley, dear place though it was; must go somewhere, see new faces, sail again on the Great South Bay, strip and bathe in the surf where the At-

lantic met the white-gray beach! And meet the people, talk with the busy farmer-fathers and the lovable, gentle, hard-working mothers who kept spruced and shining the wide kitchens of the large, old farmhouses. And the young men, and the wild, half-savage but dependable baymen, a race of themselves! Vagabonds who slept under hedges, itinerant peddlers, wandering preachers, the frequenters of roadside taverns—he must rub up against them all; must, must! They had such rich stores of nature, showed such variety of traits, were so finely human, so good, so bad, so mixed and so zealous; each living well or ill with such a strong relish! And then, the Outdoors! Like a vast, neyer-failing sweetener and purifier, with exercise to knit the muscles and varied beauty to delight the mind!

For a brief while his intention was arrested by the loop-back of his thoughts to Huntington, his own town, truly, since at West Hills, on the outskirts of the village, stood the house in which he had been born. And in Huntington was the little journal, the newspaper he had founded a year and a half earlier, while teaching school and in intervals of teaching school. It was called *The Long Islander* because that was what it gave him the finest pleasure to call himself —“Walt Whitman, Long Islander.” Or, at times, in some connections, he preferred the old Indian name for the Island —Paumanok, fish-shaped Paumanok. . . . Huntington? *The Long Islander?*

He stood, hesitating, and the breeze, coming from the south, settled his answer. It brought him, or he fancied it did, a whiff of salt from the sedge meadows, the bay and the ocean. How matchless the Atlantic would look this

morning! Quickly he thrust his hand in his pocket to make sure, clapped hold of pages cut out of one of his books, and drew them forth. A play from his volume of Shakespeare, but which? Ah, *The Tempest!* Of a shipwreck, an evil monster, a good spirit, and young lovers—and all on an island. This must be saved for the beach—fit surroundings—for it makes such a huge difference *where* you read! Granted something sound, ripe-thoughted and powerfully-expressed, Walt said to himself, *where* you read counts for more than *what*.

About to thrust back the loose pages, his eye caught on some of the fine-print lines and he checked his hand while he read them first silently and then, in a deliberate, moved voice:

“The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me.”

The words of Prospero? Of Ariel? He looked to see; and the delight of the touching relation was deepened for him on discovering that they were the words of the evil monster, Caliban.

3

Out of evil, good, was his first reflection; but then he saw that took him but a little way. It begged the old, old question of what is good, what evil? The lusts of the flesh, for example; the keen appetites which asserted themselves

so inextinguishably in Walt Whitman;—could any natural appetite be evil? Some taught that the evil lay not in the appetite but in its gratification; but what was an appetite for? Doubtless any indulgence should be curbed, should be kept within reasonable bounds, must have regard for the rights and privileges of others. . . . But sympathetic understanding, comprehension, shared feeling ought to take care of that, ought to safeguard against wrongs to others, if scarcely against excesses injurious to the self. No man could wrong a woman, knowing how a woman felt; and what man, born of woman, could help knowing sufficiently how a woman felt? It must be that for one swift interval the senses enslaved the mind. . . . And why not? In this day and generation anything sensual was heaped with scorn, although the selfsame ascetics that called sensual enjoyment evil believed devoutly in the legend that all wickedness came from parents who ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge—knowledge of good and evil! The Deity had forbidden our parents to eat of the fruit of that tree; the Deity had not wished them to know that *this* was good and *that* was evil. Was that so?

Or had not trusted these humans to decide. . . .

Were not those who continually pointed out evil simply repeating, day in and day out, the offense for which the first pair had been driven forth from Eden?

Oh! to have Elias Hicks here, and ask him the question! Hicks, the Quaker, dead these ten years. Walt would never forget him as once heard not many months before his death. The nine-year-old Walt had been taken with his parents to (of all places!) the gay ballroom of Morrison's Hotel, on

Brooklyn Heights, with windows giving on the East River and ship-filled New York harbor. For Elias preached anywhere.

The great, elegant apartment, used chiefly for genteel concerts, balls and assemblies, held many settees and chairs besides having a velvet divan running along the walls. Every seat was soon taken; the room seemed to contain many richly-dressed, fashionable women and all the notable men of the town. Mr. Pierrepont was there, George Hall, N. B. Morse, Judge Furman, General Jeremiah Johnson. . . .

A straight, Cromwellian figure clothed in drab cloth, with broad-brimmed hat and black, piercing, beautiful eyes confronted them in a moment or two of perfect stillness. Then the voice, resonant, melodious, grave. . . . The true religion, one heard, consisted not at all in rites, Bibles, sermons or Sundays—but in noiseless secret ecstasy and unremitting aspiration, in purity, in a good practical life, in charity to the poor and *toleration to all*.

4

“ Passing Freegift Terry’s, friend? ”

Walt hailed a traveler on horseback in the road below.

“ Yes.”

“ ’Twill be a favor if you’ll tell him Walt Whitman’s off for a few days to the south.”

“ Who’s ’t that’s off? ”

“ Walt Whitman—jest say, ‘ Walt ’! ”

The horseman assented and farewell’d with a sweeping arm.

Moving southward, Walt found the road too dusty for comfort, the sun having quickly parched its bed of sand. He struck off a little to the east, bearing for Babylon village, the noise of his passage through occasional brush disturbing rabbits and quail. In openings, not far distant and generally encircled by trees, his eye was pleased with glimpses of deer feeding on tender spring shoots and berries. They seldom appeared to take notice of him but, having grazed a while, would toss their antlers or their sleek heads of does and go crashing away through the bushes—shrub oak, as polite writers called it; “scrub oak” in the speech of the people. Walt stopped to admire such a burst—three does and their mates coursing by—and was surprised by the glint of sunshine on metal somewhere ahead of him. He looked about. Oh, yes; surveyors! They were laying out the line of the steam railroad, which was shortly to be extended from Hicksville—pushed through, some said, clear to the county-seat of Suffolk county, at Riverhead; perhaps might even be carried to Greenport. Greenport—Sag Harbor! Sag Harbor, with its great fleet of whaling-ships! Why not go there? Why not talk with some of the captains, view the ships, mingle with the men, hear their yarns and true, marvelous experiences?

The Welsh Williamses of his mother’s stock had been sailors, some of them; in his farthest boyhood, Walt had heard the legend of that old sea wolf, Kossabone, who had died at ninety, seated in a great arm chair in his home, his blue eyes upon the bay, the winged vessels, the distant cape. His great-grandmother’s grandfather? Perhaps; none had known certainly; the distance had dimmed everything but

the picture, like an impressive and masterly canvas, a vision which should forever fix him in the memory of his descendants. "I give, devise, and bequeath—" A heritage of understanding is the true bequest. . . .

Greenport—Sag Harbor; but meanwhile here was the glitter of the sun on a surveyor's transit, and here were men, youthful, bronzed, sighting lines, hallooing. The sound of the broadax rang from nearby woods. Walt hastened forward, and hailed.

Glad enough to see him they seemed; there were four of them, lodged at a house on the road a half-mile or more off, they said. The youngest, who might have been nineteen, smiled at Walt in the fashion of sudden, complete friendliness which Youth knows and Age has lost the trick of. The look made them secret-sharers. . . . His name was Joel—Joel Skidmore.

"Huntington way?"

"Yes. You belong to the West Hills Whitmans? Thought so."

He showed Walt the principle of the transit; waved his hand, describing careless gestures; spoke proudly of their determination and ability to survey "mile after mile of this track as straight as if you'd laid it down on the map with a ruler's edge." Curves were dangerous? "Very," affirmed young Skidmore. "Maybe, some day, they'll be less so. You see, anything moving fast, in a straight line, if it's obliged to take a bend—" He discussed ballistics, finishing: "—and already we drive along the rails at twenty miles an hour!"

Walt listened interestedly; he felt himself constantly

drawn to this youth, so nearly his own age and almost exactly the age of young Freegift Terry, toward whom he had felt a similar affection. This strong, instant feeling, first roused by the frank, smiling glance of the boy Freegift, now as quickly stirred by something in the look of Joel Skidmore, was a puzzling, unaccountable thing! "Friendliness" was too pale a word; it was a feeling far too intense, dear, precious to be characterized by any word but "love." A special form of love, with something brooding in it, yet possible (he judged) only between the young and equal-aged. The love of comrades! Undeniably, it was a passion; it flamed within you; was a thing of the body quite as torturingly as of the spirit. And lawless. . . .

Boys bathing side by side, racing naked on the smooth white contours of the beach, sleeping together under the moonlight, an arm resting lightly on a breast, a sigh escaping the lips of the dreamer. . . . A pounding at the wrists and temples; and an ache of happiness. . . .

But if this died, if the years transmuted feeling, re-directed passion, destroyed the concentration, focus, on particular persons—what then? What, indeed, but a spreading flood, the wave weaker but rolling wider, the scorch gone but the dispersed warmth remaining, bathing all the world, all men, all women, all humankind in its affectionate understanding, sympathy, comprehension, tolerance? That which had been a bodily attraction, gross yet beautiful, became (it must be) a lofty endowment, an institution on which society rested, the institution of the love of comrades, manly, high-towering. . . .

The boy Joel had stopped speaking and was looking at

him with smiling face and eyes both shy and bold. Abruptly Walt took up the thread of the youth's enthusiasm.

"Yes, you're right! Oh! what a grand country this is! Not just our own Long Island, but all these States! Like a poem; like the amplest conceivable poem! And you say after you have surveyed this route, you are going to the South or West? Oh! how I should like to go with you! We two boys together clinging, never leaving each other, going the roads, excursions North and South—how fine that would be!"

"Stay here with us; you can shoulder a transit; I'll show you enough so 'at you'll be useful. Come midsummer, we'll have the line mapped plumb to Greenport—then you and I'll travel!"

Walt shook his head. "I'm for Babylon village, then the bay and beach—fishing and swimming; maybe I'll try to make a poem or two."

"D' you rime well? Easily?"

"Oh. . . fair enough. But it's mighty cramping, like trying to keep healthy while you stay indoors all the time."

"Edgar Poe's a won'erful poet, they say."

"Musical, like a waterfall. I've heard the ocean!"

Joel's eyes danced. "Ah, so've I! That's something better than music—tinkle!"

The sun was high and the surveying party quitted to eat.

"Come along, Walt Whitman! Plenty of room for one more at the farmer's table!"

"Don't miss seeing the farmer's pretty daughters!"

"Stay the night! Sow seed for your supper! Marry a daughter and stay forever!"

Walt laughed.

“I am a carpenter, farmer, printer, teacher,” he explained, coming, “and—oh, yes!—at present a tramp-traveler.”

“He’ll be a man in the world in the eyes of the farmer’s daughters.”

“Can make himself useful.”

“Oh, a man of the world need only be ornamental.”

One of the surveying party coarsened the badinage. On Joel Skidmore’s face a deep flush showed; he looked anxiously at their companion, but Walt’s face was serene, expressionless, though he must have heard.

The farmhouse was typical of the region and period; Walt looked with pleasure about the immense kitchen which had at one end a fireplace and hearth nearly as wide as the room, domed by a great chimney. The strong, thick timbers of the ceiling had been darkened by the smoke of many fires; the housewife’s cloths and brushes had been at them until, for all their smokiness, they gleamed like huge bands of a mysterious metal. The floor was stone. A long table, unspread with any cloth, steamed with food taken from kettles that hung on iron cranes over the fireplace’s embers. A negress, very old, probably an ex-slave, was squatted down on the hearth poking the well-roasted sweet potatoes out of the wood-coals.

The roominess, the table like an immense, low altar, the kneeling woman, all gave the sense of standing in a tabernacle; but an everyday, highly-appetizing incense soaked the air. Framed in a wide doorway Walt saw the farmer’s two daughters. Suddenly they were pushed gently aside from behind and the farmer’s wife came through the door

and into the kitchen. Walt's first impression was: My own mother!

At once he began to sense differences, little, unnameable distinctions; but his mind took scarcely any note of these and affirmed all the marked resemblances. This was, again, the old face of the mother of many children (some lived; some had died; she had borne them all). A face of fullest knowledge, of content. A face that looked out from beneath a Quaker cap—clear, beautiful; the face that one saw above the spinning-wheel, the soft skin like flax, the hair like flax but whiter, softer. Such a face did not so much smile as spread a strengthened radiance. . . . No young woman could have that special beauty, like an autumnal sky, cleared for the evening. Nor any man, young or old. . . .

One of the daughters dropped her eyes modestly but the other gave Walt—gave all five young men—looks merry, meaningful, mischievous. The farmer, busy in his fields, was not there to observe his girls. Jenny—that was her name—jumped up constantly to wait on the surveyors. She would place a dumpling on a plate and her fingers would lightly touch a cheek or shoulder. Joel blushed at the contact; Walt caught the hand and lightly patted it. Another put his arm about her waist. Jenny shrieked. Her mother observed everything with undisturbed placidity.

All ate heartily, with almost no talk; there were no courses and the meal was soon finished. Jenny, slipping outside the kitchen, could be seen standing close to one of the men, the one whose arm had gone about her. They whispered, fingers twining; she broke away with a cry and a pretense

of flight from him, but immediately posed herself in the doorway to wave a good-by. Her eyes admired him. On the way back to work, the other three made game of Joel for his blush and other matters.

“ Can’t ye take what’s offered ye, lad? ”

“ He’s particular, is Joel; Jenny’s too usual for him. He’s waiting to take a snatch at t’other, her sister.”

“ Jenny’s been all around . . . your turn next, Joel.”

Joel brazened it out; laughed, red-faced, though Walt saw the discomfiture in his eyes. And noted that though he laughed, he said nothing. When work had been resumed and they were a little apart from the rest, the boy turned to Walt and said fiercely:

“ I can’t stand it—their making a fool of me. I—I— Stay over to-night and I’ll leave the job and go along o’ you, ’f you’re willing, to-morrow.”

“ Come with me? What great times we’ll have! ” Walt’s arm went affectionately, exuberantly, about the boy’s shoulder. Then his face altered and he said, gently: “ You mustn’t mind what they say, though; don’t come for that reason, come for better reasons! Tell me, why do you mind their talk? ” His question was earnest; the tone of asking, persuasive.

Joel fumbled for words. At length:

“ Well, I—I hate all that kind of thing, but ”—with a species of desperate candor—“ I guess what cuts is a feeling they’re belittlin’ me. As if I weren’t—a man grown.”

Walt’s eyes praised the honest admission. But the boy’s tongue was loosed. He went on, with increasing intensity:

“ I’m as much a man grown as any of ’em. What do they

know? They don't know all my thoughts and feelin's, I guess! Now, tell me, do they? I don't *talk*; they are always talkin'. They're always tellin', too: 'I said this, she said that; then I kissed her'—an' a lot more. . . . If it's all true, or the half on it, why do they need to *tell* about it?" He appealed to Walt, who answered:

"Now you've hit it, Joel! If it's true—if! Joel, it isn't—it just ain't! You know it, I know it; each knows it of the other even as it's told. But—the tale is to the teller and comes back most to him; the song is to the singer, *he* hears it perfectly sung! A fellow doesn't talk about the fish on his string; he yarns about the fish he almost hooked."

They ran boundary lines through the afternoon. Walt, easily absenting himself without notice, wandered back toward the farmhouse. The girl, Jenny, was spreading white, fresh-washed linens on bushes. Walt approached her, smiling.

She smiled back invitingly but tossed her head at the same instant as if to say: "Come along if you want to, but if you don't *I* sha'n't care!" He came steadily forward until he was very close; then said:

"You're the prettiest gal this side Huntington, Jenny!"

Her black, opaque eyes reflected little flashes of the sunlight. But she said nothing.

"The men are crazy about you, even Joel."

No answer. Her eyes were on the cloth she was spreading.

"I'll warrant I could make you like me better than any of 'em."

“Conceit!” she murmured, but gave him her glance and a renewed invitation.

He took her hand, pressed it, and went on:

“I’ve listened to them; heard them tell how well you liked ’em. According to their tell, you like each of ’em better than the others. You’d never say no to any of them; in fact, you’ve never refused whichever one’s talking at the moment.”

The opacity of her eyes seemed to surrender to depths of uncertainty, a quality of uneasiness or mistrust of his meaning. He waited for the look of intense curiosity. It came.

“So I know you’ll be glad of me! You’ll like me lots better than their best.”

“Much you know!” she answered, pertly. “Besides, I don’t want you!”

Walt looked genuinely surprised.

“Why, Jenny! Any one to hear you would think you were choicy!”

“Well, I am!”

But his gusts of laughter made this proclamation futile.

“Why, no, Jenny, you’re not choicy; you’re not picking and choosing, not you! You’re taking all comers! You’re any one’s that offers . . . impartial, like the weather; variable as the weather, to be sure—”

The full import of what he was saying came upon her like a man whose pretended admiration masked a violent and terrible seizure and embrace—came upon her while her eyes were still regarding with secret favor his plentiful black hair, stalwart figure and clean, sensitive features. The light

went from her eyes as a flame is snuffed out somewhere behind a luminous pane; she was almost white-lipped; her breast rose and fell.

“You—you’ve mistooked me. You’ve no warrant to say—to let on you *believe*—”

The change in his look was transfiguring; yet not a line of the face altered. Simply, something came out of the gray-blue eyes which had never wavered from the direct regard they fastened on her black ones; something sped from him to her, caught her up as surely as a strong arm encircles a stumbling child. Her breath, drawn in sharply by a sob, escaped in a relaxing sigh. Nothing was said for several minutes; defense, apology, extenuation were forgotten.

“What is it we want, you and I?” he muttered finally but with no air of addressing the question to her. “Friends? Yes. Lovers? Yes! Don’t shrink back, Jenny! Lovers? Why not, why not? Every woman should have a hundred lovers; every man should love a hundred women. She has, he does! You can’t make it otherwise; it oughtn’t to be otherwise. . . . Who says that love means bodily commerce? Then, for him or her, love means nothing but bodily commerce! . . . You thought I had mistaken you, Jenny, but I was only by way of showing you the risk.”

“You think—I’m—wicked.”

“I think nothing of the sort! Jenny, there’s no virtue in me, or any other man, or any woman, to pronounce upon your doings—to say ‘Jenny did right’ or ‘Jenny acted wrong.’ No, no! Only, whatever you do, the risk o’ being misunderstood is there. Or, not so much the risk o’ being misunderstood, either—there’s less real misunderstanding in

the world than people like to play at; people pretend to misunderstand as it serves their purposes. No, not the *risk* o' being *misunderstood*"—he chuckled, rather sadly—"so much as the *certainty* o' being *misjudged!*"

After a pause he went on:

"Joel's going away with me in the morning." She looked at him, for a second, with betraying eyes. "Ah! . . . And yet there's nothing between you and Joel except—that he loves you and you love him," Walt finished gently. "No words, not even exchanged looks! Oh! I know."

She spoke in a stifled voice.

"He's the only one I—"

"He's one that is *worth* caring about," Walt answered the unfinished confession. He made the moment easier for her with a whimsical glint of the gray-blue eyes. "Good-by!" he exclaimed, "save a place for me at supper!"

5

A different Jenny sat with them at the evening meal. And afterward Walt contrived to get away from the others on a pretext of taking a walk with Jenny and Joel. He talked easily for a little distance; then left with the excuse of going back to see the farmer about a return in the harvest season. A few sentences covered the topic, and he and Jenny's father discussed politics—Van Buren, the prospects of the Whigs at the fall elections, Andy Jackson and Henry Clay; for the day was still a day of persons, or personalities, rather than of parties. Walt scandalized the farmer by his lack of partizanship, or perhaps bigotry, though the countryman's phrase was "political principles, the positive principles of

Thomas Jefferson, sir!" Young Mr. Whitman listened to the exposition of rural ideals in government—"we till the soil, sir, whilst those rascals in office soil the till!"—but throughout the audition a separate consciousness seemed to exist within him; he had a strange sensation of being both here and elsewhere, and was possessed, pervaded by a glow of clairvoyance.

Jenny . . . what was her waywardness? The girl wanted with the essential innocence of whatsoever was beautiful, alive! Wantoning yet innocent—it was necessary to fall back upon the French word *abandon* to describe her. Like a showy flower, but a flower is for any bee that passes. Not so the woman, this girl of the farm among the scrub oaks, the sandy soil and lonely blossoming. She was for Joel; he had seemed to know it from the first but how, he allowed, he could not tell. It had been almost as if he could hear the varying beating of their hearts and had recognized the profound, essential accord—systole, diastole—in rhythms inaudible and to any formal judgment, far apart. . . .

What those two would find to say to each other, or whether, indeed, they would find words relevant at all, he speculated only briefly. But he pondered silently, in his separate consciousness, on the miracle of young lovers. It was a miracle that had never happened to himself, Walt Whitman. He had loved—yes!—impartially and enthusiastically all manner of people; a variety of places; hills, orchards of rose-pink and white, the sky and the resonant, magnificent sea; the wonderful faces of quiet mothers, the immature faces of children and growing boys. And his

mind had been given oh! so often to the contemplation of vistas beyond his power to describe or even to characterize—vistas that had something inhuman, unearthly about them, so far did they reach, so high they raised you up! But love? the single object, overwhelmingly concentrated feeling, the one woman? Not yet; it might be, never; for Walt faced the fact of his own universality.

The heat and light of the sun, focussed by a burning-glass, endangered the existence of the thing they were concentrated upon; shriveled the flower, set fire to the leaf. A mere fraction of the force of the ocean, cumulated in a giant wave, multiplied its dispersed destructive power. What was love, this love? Was it heat-light kindling flame—the overriding wave of unspent force? Smoke and crackle and ashes; the sun shone on. The wave broke; the ocean remained an inexhaustible reservoir. . . .

Banks, the United States Bank, Martin Van Buren and the more than doubtful value of steam railroads while we had excellent canals and waterways. Walt, rising from his chair, looked out into the darkening spring evening and saw two figures proceeding toward the house. In a few moments Jenny and Joel entered; for good night they found each other's eyes a second. The farmer, emptying his pipe, ceased his deliberate taps to inquire of Walt:

“ You look mortal set up, friend? ”

“ I've just made a poem.”

“ So! let's hear it.”

“ 'Tisn't recitable, or in words; for all that 't is a poem, the most jubilant poem; full of manhood and womanhood

and infancy, full of sunshine and the motion of waves—a poem of joys! ”

The eyes in the weathered face followed Walt's. An expression of grave surprise was succeeded on the farmer's face by one of calculating appraisal. He paid no attention to his daughter but scrutinized Joel Skidmore with care, finally saying:

“ We'll be able to double the acreage, then, next year.”

6

Walt and Joel were bedded in the attic, a place of large lateral dimensions and uncertain headroom which they had to themselves.

The boy was shaking with excitement; his lit face and shining eyes, disclosed by the fitful gleams of a single candle, gave an extraordinary impression, as if he were a creature seen in a vision. He talked jerkily, in whispers; and it required the full leap of his companion's intuition to follow, comprehend meanings. . . .

In half-undress, stretched out on the blankets of their bed, which was the floor under a sloping gable, his clasped hands supporting his head and tilting it to one side, Walt watched Joel bending over and fumbling with his shoes. The smooth skin of the boy's arms had a warm ivory coloring; the muscles moved beneath it as a swell comes and goes under the unmarred surface of the sea. Behind him, against the diverse planes of the gabled roof, amazing shadows were projected, suggesting an incessant, frantic struggle in the art of representation, a vain but interminable

effort to depict a three-dimensional creature in a world of but two dimensions, a world that knew thickness but could not conquer it. . . . In this weird struggle of the shadows there was something delineative, something sad. It was altogether too like the grotesque endeavor of mortals to compass ideas—ideas, shapes apart from them and shapes that mankind can lay no hold of. . . .

“Walt! Walt!”

Joel’s incoherent whispering commanded every inch of his companion’s attention at last. The confession was explicit and staggering.

“God! . . . Did you tell her you were going away in the morning?”

“I *can’t*—now!”

“You must!”

“No . . . everything’s different. Everything’s changed! I want to stay—with her!”

Walt groaned.

“And double the acreage next year? Marry her—chain yourself to this cleared ground among the scrub oaks? You see how the farmer views you—as a welcome conscript to speed the plow!”

That didn’t matter! Walt meditated, so far as extreme mental turmoil would allow. His first dismay somewhat overcome, he tested the situation.

“You don’t suppose you are the first?”

She had said so, and Joel believed her implicitly. His thought running back to Jenny’s behavior during their talk of the afternoon, Walt accepted Jenny’s word and Joel’s belief in it. Indeed, affirmed it further with his own full be-

lief; for there had been no falseness in look, word or accent. . . . "You think—I'm—" He heard again her sob upon the word, "wicked."

For a moment Walt felt an impulse to blame himself in this business. But then a rude instinct rose up in strong, instant denial. What had he said? "bodily commerce?" and this direct phrase only in an emphatic distinction incapable of being misunderstood. He was not even certain that Jenny had caught words which weren't addressed to her and were simply the result of his habit of reflecting aloud.

Into one species of blunder his racing thoughts did not lead him. Walt asked no question designed to fix the responsibility for what had happened. Responsibility—which is not precisely synonymous with "blame." Those who assign the blame for anything, he saw, merely color their view of it; those who try to settle responsibility grope in the dark; those who talk of consequences mistake their guesses for the workings of eternal law. . . .

Joel, by his side, was obscuring the clear but difficult perception of things-in-themselves, these intuitions which came as vividly out of the revealed situation as bright strokes of lightning flash from darkly-laden clouds. The patter of rain muffles the thunderclap. The incessant, stammering ecstasy of the boy's happiness was equally continuous, insistent on making itself heard.

"Oh, Walt! She's so wholly dear to me—now! I feel that nothing I can ever do to protect her, guard her, will ever be enough. Just to think that she's *given*—"

He overflowed with the sense of an immense tenderness

for Jenny, *his* Jenny; by the gift of her body, Walt reflected, she had acquired in exchange dominion over his soul. For Joel's words, mood, uncontrollable emotion swept into limbo the material aspects of this occurrence—or accident—or fatality; however you chose to designate it. Walt was stunned with the pure beauty that was the heart of an episode which the world would stamp as low, base, or else jeer at lewdly. For a moment he wondered if Jenny had been raised to any such pitch of exaltation as this boy, her lover; but saw almost instantly how beside the point any such speculation must be. She had lifted the boy—or rather, the man; for he was that from hence forth—to the heights, to the sublime height, and to his thrilled vision she was there beside him. Indeed, to his sight, she had been there before him, and had beckoned and drawn him up to her. . . .

Looked at from the lower levels, what was there to see? A youth who, in a few hours, had quitted adolescence for maturity. A timid, questing boy, with no "definition," as a painter would say, just a bright, blurred young thing, had become as fixed and irremovable as one of these Long Island hills. It was exactly as if, in one department, Nature had reversed a familiar process, and the butterfly, folding its gay wings and entombing itself in a chrysalis, were about to emerge, almost immediately, as a grub. Walt made this comparison in no disparaging spirit; his interest was the pure curiosity of the poet or the scientist, with a keen regret that he was to lose a prospective companion on the road and a sharp eagerness to know all about a transformation that happened to so many of the race and would (or

wouldn't?) befall himself . . . some fine day—"fine" in the old sense of "final: terminal" of course. . . .

The possessor of happiness, the beloved of the gods, the youth turned man and the knower of inconceivable felicity—the mere-nineteen-year-old by his side on the floor of that attic, had at length left off his whispering and lay silent, perhaps spent of words worthy to communicate his intense feeling. In the profound quiet under the gables Walt felt, for a period, depressed and lonely. It did seem to him, at that moment, as if the life of the grub were infinitely desirable—the life of a few isolated acres, of sunrise and sunset, of winter and summer, of spasmodic, backbreaking toil. For what? For food, shelter, clothing; the comfort of other lives; the duty or privilege of reproduction. Who, looking at the grub, knew how brightly he saw his existence? Here was one creeping out of the chrysalis—behold his delight, transporting joy, in newly-achieved grubhood! There, in the person of Jenny's father, was the same creature after many years of grubbiness. Disillusioned, unhappy? Not at all! "We'll be able to double the acreage, then, next year!" The old question in the rigid catechisms, as to what was the chief end of man, seemed fairly self-answered or self-answering.

With women was it any different? Walt's thoughts turned to Jenny's mother, to his own mother. Women, he instinctively felt (as if, somehow, he were mentally almost at one with them) were surer of happiness than men. No woman need be without child; if she bore her husband no children, then he remained to her in their place. Children were wayward? or half-witted? or crippled? When had

such fortune ever failed to make them dearer to the mother? Here Walt could speak from personal knowledge. There was his little brother, Jeff, such a fine lad! but not robust. Their mother cherished Jeff—though scarcely tenderer of him than Walt himself was. The baby, Eddie—

Walt would not trust himself to think upon Eddie. After all, Eddie was so young! It was horrible to think that the youngest might grow up an idiot (grow up? How cruel words are! No, not “grow up”—merely age *without growing up*). . . .

There seemed to be some marvelous, merciful compensation whereby the happiness of women—of mothers—was made secure to them. The love that filled the mother’s heart as the milk filled her breasts was spontaneous and always just-proportioned, if one could use a measuring word to describe something plainly immeasurable. But what I mean, Walt thought to himself, is: Where the mother cannot be happy in her child, it is somehow made up to her so that she is happy in her love of her child. . . .

And in the thought of such a happiness, creatively imagined, he fell asleep.

7

On the Babylon road, next morning, all such sustained contemplation of the inner ideal was banished by the exuberance of sunshine and a dry, cool (almost chilly!) northwest wind. The sweet taste of buckwheat cakes drenched in syrup, the delicious fragrance of the farmer’s cider, stir of blood and the bright grandeur of the day outdoors were all

part and parcel of Walt's overflowing sense of well-being. The sense of well-being—and that familiar, irresistible sense of freedom which comes from the long look ahead on a country road. How I love these old wood roads! the tramp-teacher thought to himself, and he began to recollect some of their names, names that had a special significance already, in some instances, lost. There was the Yellow House Road; over on the north shore he had come, in his wanderings, upon the Crystal Brook Road. . . . Names of places on Paumanok, this "Island of Shells" in the lingua of the Indian tribes, had often an equal charm. Fire Place and Canoe Place, for example! Oldtimers, like Rumsey Platt, ignored such modern designations as Port Jefferson and Mount Sinai, and spoke still of goin' t' Drown Meadow or puttin' up at Old Man's. . . .

In Babylon, where he had taught one year, Walt felt almost as much at home as in Huntington; he repaired to the house of Zophar Wines, sure of a welcome. The eighteen-year-old daughter, Temperance, a demure girl with dark hair and the steel-blue eyes of her Puritan father, opened the door with a curtsy and the slight blush which, with her, always took the place of a smile. Her mother was dead. Walt's greeting was hearty.

"Well, Temperance! Here you see me again, foot-loose—the same young vagabond!"

She widened the way and he entered, looking about him. Nothing was changed since the winter he had boarded there. No—yes! A steel engraving, the *Parable of the Loaves and Fishes*, had been shifted to the opposite wall.

Temperance decorously took his sapling-stick, which Walt had cut for himself on the way into Babylon, and placed it in a corner. Then she said:

“Father is in the parlor. He has spent the morning there asking for guidance. Dinner is almost ready.”

Her tone was earnest, not cold but grave, contained; and her words had an inflexible accent, as if the pronunciation of each syllable discharged a duty. Familiarity with tone and accent, with her manner and the atmosphere of that home, prevented Walt from feeling in any degree ill at ease. Warmth, cordiality in the ordinary sense, were not to be expected, were simply non-existent here; an early Christian martyr appearing on the threshold would have been received with more respect, undoubtedly, and perhaps with a display of reverence; he would not, however, have been embraced. Walt thought for an amused moment of that impetuous apostle Saint Paul, who instructed his followers to “salute one another with a holy kiss.” Paul, a good deal like himself—fiery, joyous, impulsive, enthusiastic. What would happen if he, Walt, flung his arms about Temperance and kissed her . . . probably a kiss on the forehead was meant. . . .

Temperance had left the room and in the midst of his hazardous speculation the door leading to the parlor opened and Zophar Wines came in. He was tall, almost Walt’s height, with a beard encircling the face from ear to ear, iron-gray and apparently never scissored. Two oblique lines from the sides of the high-bridged nose to the stern corners of the narrow mouth had lost their usual delineative importance because of a fanatical light in the eyes, a light new

to Walt. It stopped for a moment the cheerful greeting on the young man's lips and gave Zophar Wines opportunity to say:

"Walter Whitman, have you heard the great word? Is it the message of the Lord that has brought you here to join our band and make such preparation as we can against the great Day?"

A new sect, thought Walt, not very much astounded. He had heard of new sects since his childhood but it seemed to him they had been especially plentiful in the last two-three years, since the hard times of 1837.

"No—no—I'm afraid I've not been directed here, Mr. Wines. If so, I hadn't suspected it."

"Who knoweth the Lord's ways? . . . full of mercy. You were doubtless directed, appearing at this time. The message is clear. We are to prepare for the Second Coming. The day, the hour—even the minute—is set."

"You mean . . . the end of the world?"

"The end of this world, yes! and the beginning of the Life Eternal. . . ."

Walt slightly shuddered. "But—"

"I have been on my knees for a number of hours"—he tottered and steadied himself with a hand on the back of a chair—"seeking instructions and guidance. All has been made clear to me. I shall cancel all my mortgages this afternoon, discharge every one of indebtedness to me, and otherwise take the first steps in the final adjustment of my worldly affairs."

"Good, good!" The comment was involuntary. "I mean," Walt amended, "I think it must be wonderful, beau-

tiful! to think you can enrich people like that, by a word and just the few strokes of a pen! Though—if the world's to end, can it make such a difference about debts and things? ”

“ ‘ Give all thou hast to the poor—’ ”

“ They'll have no chance to enjoy it.”

“ It is not given them for their enjoyment—”

“ But for your forgiveness? ”

Zophar Wines frowned, saying, however, with pitying patience: “ You do not understand.”

“ Do you? Are you sure? ”

“ It may be not . . . it is my business to execute the Divine command.”

The door to the dining room opened and Temperance Wines stood aside to let them pass.

They stood while Zophar Wines said grace. The two men seated themselves. Temperance glided to and fro, bringing a few supplementary dishes. Then she, too, sat. Her father attended strictly to eating.

The zest taken from his outdoor appetite, Walt ate slowly, with ventures of his eyes toward the girl, less often toward the rich holder of mortgages. On one of these excursions his glance struck full upon a look of Temperance's. The pure, steely gaze suggested a young creature perfectly armored against any ambush by the emotions—either her own or another's. The warm and care-free, therefore reckless, blood in Walt found in this protected look as great a provocation as any free lance ever found in the sight of a securely-defended fortress. *Avant!* Her countenance unbearably challenged his nature. Zophar Wines spoke:

"You have secured the cloth, Temperance?"

"Yes, father."

"Doubtless you will set to sewing upon it this day?"

She assented. Her father said to Walt, explanatorily:

"Our preparations are well under way. We shall be ready. . . . The women have taken upon them the task of preparing our robes, to be worn on the great Day, now so near at hand."

"Robes?" The young man made an effort to appear intelligent. "But I thought on the Day of Judgment we were all to stand na—" He checked himself, unembarrassed but unwishful to embarrass Temperance.

"It is true our souls shall stand naked before the Seat of Judgment," answered Zophar Wines, in a calm, quiet voice. "But, though these bodies are nothing, it is meet that we should array ourselves . . . for the hour when the heavens shall be unrolled and the earth shall shrivel up and the ocean run dry. . . ."

"Is all Babylon preparing?"

"No. . . . Alas! this community is well-named. Though there are many who are thoughtless, rather than wicked. Many, indeed, in our own Congregational flock—almost half—have been deaf to the words of our pastor."

"Mr. Sammis?"

"Aye. A wonderful, inspired leader. It was specially revealed to him in a vision how we should all foregather on Fire Island beach, there to await the final summons."

"And see the ocean run dry," Walt marveled.

"Day of wrath and day of burning!"

"Oh! . . . I can't believe that!"

"Those who do not believe will be lost," declared Zophar Wines sadly.

"Temperance, do you believe?" Impetuously asked.

Temperance Wines spoke in her contained, small voice that had only one accent—inflexibility:

"Selah Mulford, the younger, is of little faith. He scoffed openly. . . . I have broken my betrothal with him."

Walt's chair grated noisily on the floor. He did not rise but sat regarding her as if she had suddenly changed shape to something inhuman.

"But—that isn't—why should you—?"

The end of the world, he reflected, had probably been somewhat advanced as to day and hour for the younger Selah Mulford. The first reaction to Temperance's disclosure was a recoiling as from an act of savage cruelty; and yet this was no unusual manifestation of the Puritan temperament. History, not to speak of legend, recorded plenty of similar actions. . . .

How such conduct was to be conceived, understood, Walt did not pretend to himself that he knew—not yet, not yet! though he hoped to know, to understand in order to tolerate. There were Puritans in the world and (he did not doubt) they were somehow necessary to it, served some useful purpose. He came back to an awareness of Zophar Wines's tones:

"The young man was very violent, which showed the devil that was in him and which he could not cast out."

"I must go see him!" Walt exclaimed. "Oh! the poor fellow! Temperance, don't you know he loved you?"

A rebuking murmur came from her father. The full per-

sonal force of Walt, the strong, animal magnetism of the young man facing her, had entered into his speech or else had vibrated wordlessly in the space between them. For a second the steel-blue eyes seemed to darken ever so slightly, the long upper lip was noticeable. . . . Then she spoke, perfectly-controlled:

“I was guided.”

Walt broke loose. He turned on Zophar Wines.

“You all look for guidance—from outside, never from within! I should think, if God were anywhere, he would be within men. But you go outside. I should be afraid of that; afraid I might be guided by devils of one sort or another. Why, you are Christians, aren't you? Yes. And it's all the other religions who look for guidance to outside gods and devils and ghosts and men and women who have died and what not. I thought the one thing marking a Christian was, he believes that God is *within* men?”

He left the table abruptly, and the room; rushed out of the house leaving his sapling-stick behind. Budded like Aaron's rod, it had seemed to him, a few hours earlier, a greater miracle. But now he felt sick—a sick man in a world grown wicked, a world shortly to be judged and the greater part of it eternally damned.

8

Like most houses of its day, the residence of Zophar Wines was almost on the edge of the sidewalk. Therefore it befell that Walt's initial velocity carried him into heavy collision with another and more feebly-moving body—a body which seemed unfitted to sustain impacts.

“Gosh! . . . Forgive me! I’m sorry.”

Selah Mulford, the younger, propped himself with his hands, his legs remaining *disjecta membra* on the ground.

“Sorry? Sho’m I, sho’m I.”

“Why . . . it’s you, eh, Selah?”

“Name’s Beelzebub,” came a languid correction. “Name’s Beelzebub.” With sudden energy: “Ever shee me b’fore? I’m th’ Prinshe of Dev’ls. H’lo, li’l Dev’l!” He greeted Walt affectionately.

“Here.” Walt was bending over, with gentle lifting tugs. “Get up, Selah. You remember me, don’t you? Walt? Walt Whitman?”

“Thish th’ end o’ th’ world,” stated the sitter. “As Beelzebub, Prinshe of Dev’ls, I’m here to claim my own.”

He meditated, physically inert.

“I came here d’rect from my infernal abode (hiccough) . . . wash prosheeding awright, revolvin’ on m’ own axshis when— What, ’xshactly happened?”

“I ran into you—didn’t see you—coming out of Mr. Wines’s house here.”

A light of recognition dawned triumphantly. . . . Young Mulford struggled to his feet. Swaying against Walt, he proclaimed:

“Thash it—Winesh! Thash the countershine. Musht remember t’ give it when challengshe’. Come, have a drink!”

I’m damned if I don’t! was Walt’s inner reaction to this invitation. As he hooked his arm in Selah Mulford’s he saw again the eyes of the girl, Temperance, like a sunless

winter morning. And the face, incapable of a smile; a little, self-conscious blush was all it ever exhibited. . . .

The Woodchuck Hole, as the tavern was called, stood hospitably open; there was a bustle about the bar due to arrivals on the noon stages. Greetings fusiladed in Walt's direction, with a few comments on his escort.

"Well, ef here ain't Selah back agin!"

"Hello, thar—Hosanna!"

Hard cider, whisky and rum were offered to the thirsty. It was before the day of beer; there were no light wines, but Madeira or port was available for those who drank expensively. Walt and Selah took hot rum sweetened with a drop of molasses.

"'Pears to me half of Babylon's here."

Walt addressed the proprietor of the Woodchuck Hole, who grinned as he replied: "This here new seck's been won'erful for trade. There's three sets o' people. Some believes as how the end o' everything's coming Saturday week; some disbelieves it; some—and they're the biggest—allows as they don't know but they're takin' no chances! They're takin' a nip whilst they're sure of gettin' it. Mortal scared, some on 'em are, too."

"I hear Mr. Sammis's preaching the end."

"Yep. But I ain't scoring up any liquor. Them as drinks pays their money right down on the shelf!"

Walt finished his second glass of rum. "Have 'nozzor," Selah Mulford insisted heavily. But Walt shook his head and took a fresh grip on his companion's arm. "Come on, Selah, you've had enough. We've got to git!"

"Whash use goin' anywhere?"

"Well, the world ain't at an end yet!"

Amid some friendly derision Walt conducted the young man outside, turning from the main street to a lane that led south and ended, after they had made a slow progress of less than half a mile, at the shore of the Great South Bay.

"Jump in!"

"Here . . . hol' on, Walt!"

A brief struggle was followed by a prodigious splash. A moment later the temporary Beelzebub was frantically scrambling up the short piling that bulwarked the shore. Walt fled like the wind. A dripping savage pursued, and finally overtook him. They wrestled breathlessly.

"Damn you, Selah, you've got me all wet!"

Nothing could have exceeded in effectiveness the obvious retort, except, possibly, the manner in which Selah made it.

9

This was a Thursday; the end of everything being still nine days distant; and because it would never do to abandon young Mulford in that time Walt dragged him with himself over to the Great South Beach; and also because, on the beach, there was no Woodchuck Hole and no sidewalk leading past Zophar Wines's front door.

The season was rather unusually advanced; one got the feeling of the approaching month as June, rather than May. There was no longer the suggestion of ice along the ocean shore, mornings; the dull, soft brown of the bayside meadows gave a hint of changing color to pale, delicious green. Hourly, it seemed, through the day flights of birds

streamed overhead, going northward. The sun, in any shelter from the wind, poured down a heat not markedly different from that of midsummer. Bracing weather, bracing but perfect. . . .

The two young men, lightly provisioned, quartered themselves in one of the very few habitations on the beach, a one-room shack put up for the use of fishermen. The long stretch of sand dunes, never exceeding a half-mile in width, separated from Babylon by seven miles of salt water, had, in its incomparable loneliness and sea-born beauty, just the effect upon Selah Mulford that Walt hoped for. The Woodchuck—Walt's name for him—resumed his twenty-year-old nimbleness. This boisterousness sometimes relapsed into long periods of contemplation—"but not thinking very much about anything"—which better suited Walt's own habit. At such times the two would thrash over their problems.

"Walt!"

"Hi, Woodchuck!"

"Ever love a girl?"

"N-no. Not yet."

"Well—don't!"

"Not aimin' to."

"Oh . . . 'f course *not*. Fellow never is! I'm saying: *Don't*."

"Ain't you over that by this time?" A little derisively. The Woodchuck spoke with sudden vehemence:

"What in hell do you know about it, anyway?"

"What in hell made you ever think you was in love with Temperance Wines—anyway?"

The patient sank back on the sand, his head pillowed on his hands. Walt risked a cast:

“ ’Twasn’t anything she said or did, I bet.”

“ Mebbe not ”—sulkily.

“ Well, then, ’Chuck—”

The Woodchuck elevated himself; glared at his pesterer.

“ ’F you want to know . . . Walt, it was the look of her—something in her face, I can’t describe it, makes you feel as if she provoked you, like a flower out o’ reach. I don’t mean she’s *pretty*,” he went on, “ nor handsome. Temperance’s no *beauty*, only, there’s that about her makes her seem the only one of her kind. I guess you’re understanding what I mean,” he finished, his keen eyes on Walt’s confessing countenance.

“ But, ’Chuck, you ain’t saying did you love her? ”

The Woodchuck squirmed. “ Ain’t that love? ” he demanded. “ What—what is it, then ”—rather feebly.

Walt mused. “ ’Pears to me like—hunting,” he said.

“ She’s not that kind of a girl! ”

“ You mean you’re not that kind of a fellow! ”

“ I ain’t no worse’n you are, Walt Whitman! I’m a sight better’n most of the fellows I know.”

“ There’s something about a girl like Temperance,” Walt commented aloud, “ raises the dickens in a man. . . . So almighty pure and cold! You wonder if you could make her *human*. Ain’t that so? ”

“ Guess that’s so. But look here: You’re not by way of being fair. I didn’t just think about Temperance like that. I—I admired her—worshipped her, in a way! *Always*

kept thinking: She's 'way above me in—in *goodness*. Anyhow things went, *she'd* be right."

"Prop you up. I see. 'Stead of that, she knocked the few remaining props right from under you."

"A-a-ah! You don't know anything about it!"

"I'm here to be set right, to learn," Walt submitted. "I've a real, lively curiosity about something that might happen to me, if not to-day, then to-morrow."

"It won't be the same with you. It isn't the same with any two fellows, I bet. Besides, you're different from most men."

"How?" Walt felt affronted.

"Oh, you—you love 'em all; love everybody; that satisfies you; your guts is different. Walt, you've no notion what I've been through—*hell!* I get so sick sometimes I think the only way to be clean and halfway decent and get back any self-respect is to—to marry some good girl—if *she'd* have me . . ."

He stopped, his teeth closing on his lip, and two tears rolled down his boyish face. Walt's eyes shone, too, and the look he gave the Woodchuck was a look of great love. And with a gesture of his hand toward the other, Walt said:

"'Chuck . . . don't I know! But you couldn't have married Temperance Wines, not and been happy! Say, you tell me if a girl like her who never felt a wicked impulse in her life, mebbe—anyway an impulse *she'd* call wicked—could make a wife, a *wife*, for a fellow like you—or me, or most of us? It ain't reasonable. . . . You and I ain't got the temperament to live that way. Why, all those sort of

people die in the performance of their duty!—because whatever they do is a discharging of their duty, never a pleasure, never a deep, joyous satisfaction.”

“Read me something, Walt; or no, make up something to recite. That’d be better.”

“’Chuck—I can’t say the things I aim to say. Not yet.”

“Go on! Say them anyhow!”

Walt propped his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. His eyes were fixed lovingly on Selah Mulford’s face. After a while his voice broke the silence between them and imposed a tiny pattern of human words against the steady intonations of the surf.

“A young man came to me with a message from his brother,
How know the message; how know that he came from his
brother—and my brother?
How know the whether and when of his brother?
Tell him to give me . . . signs.

“I stand before the young man face to face; I take his right
hand in my left hand, his left in my right hand,
And I answer for his brother and for . . . *men* . . . I answer
for the Poet, and send these signs:

“Him all wait for . . . him all yield up to . . . his word is
decisive,
Him they accept”—Walt gestured toward the ocean—“in him
lave . . .
Him they immerse, and he immerses them.”

He stopped; his hands rested palms downward on the sand; his body was immobile but the light in his eyes, some strong radiation of physical health and magnetism proceeding from him, held Selah Mulford in a thralldom of surprise, an emotional vise so strong that the youth could not tell, afterward, whether admiration or latent awe or a noble

curiosity made him powerless to do more than breathe lightly. . . . Walt's voice was like a clear-toned bell:

“He puts things in their attitudes,
He puts *to-day!* out of himself . . . with plasticity . . . and
love . . .
What can be answered he answers, and what cannot be answered he shows how it cannot be answered.
He is the . . . Answerer . . .”

Ceased the bell-like tones, ended the chant on that word “*Answerer*” stressed so musically on the first syllable, finishing in a light murmur lost in the wash of waters just beyond them. Walt leaped to his feet, stood erect, poised, free, eagerly youthful, youthfully yearning. His flung-apart arms fell, he dropped to the sand beside the other, clasped him, exclaimed:

“Oh, Selah, if a man can only *feel* everything, he'll know everything! And he'll be able to answer every unsatisfied need of our natures! The rich, the poor, the ennui'd and the lonely, the happy and the miserable, the chaste and the soiled, the unclean—all, all will respond to him, and he to them. He'll have his poems wrought not in words but in lives, in human flesh and bone and nerves and red, pulsed blood! He'll be an *Answerer*. Oh, Selah, that's what I want to be!”

IO

But there were many, many hours in which it seemed to Walt that he was only a carnal creature. The strength of these lusts of the flesh frightened him; he was not different from other young men in that satisfaction brought shud-

ders. The awful despondency from which not even the sympathetic companionship of the Woodchuck could save him finally provoked in Walt a spiritual rebellion. He said to his comrade one day:

“ ’Chuck, it’s no use; I’m bad, bad! Where I hoped there might be some gold in my composition, I’m streaked with clay instead. You know what I am; I don’t see how you can endure being with me. Tell me, now, how is it? ”

The Woodchuck was embarrassed to find words.

“ Well, Walt, whenever I go wild and start to wade across the bay for liquor, you hold me back, don’t you? You’re doing something for me! ”

“ Trouble is, I can’t do anything for myself.”

Selah Mulford groped for a great truth; said finally:

“ Walt! If you can do something for any one else, it’s time to quit worrying about yourself! ”

“ My Star and Garter! Guess you’re right, ’Chuck. . . . Must be nigh midday; the sun’s high. And hot! What do you say to a bath in the ocean? The water’ll be like ice, but there’s no wind; weather’s as warm as July, almost.”

Leisurely they stripped, picked their barefooted way carefully over broken shells and bits of splintered driftwood and together, with a shout, ran with swashing strides down the shelving lip of the sand until they stood waist-high in the Atlantic. Though the day was windless, a tumbling, racing surf remained from the southeasterly winds of several days before.

The water, virginally green and blue, pricked like a thousand needles. To escape its instant numbing effect Walt and his comrade kept incessantly in the liveliest motion.

They danced, shrieked, pummelled each other; desisted to duck a glittering comber; sprang to the summit of a breaker, riding it for a second like seahorses until it flung them sprawling on the slope of the shore. Then, breathless, faces dripping and their eyes alone apparently alive in naked, half-drowned bodies, the two lay still for an interval, regarding each other impenetrably. With a yell Walt leaped toward Selah Mulford. Too late! In a twinkling there was nothing but the sky and the ocean and the wide sand along which, like reawakened figures from a frieze of Hellenic sculpture, one beautiful Greek sped in pursuit of another.

Heads down, chests heaving, feet spurning the sand; dodging, twisting, turning; the faint whistling of breath inaudible in the symphonic racket of the surf, neither of these primitives caught sight of a company of people gradually assembling on the crests of the dunes. They interlocked in struggle; fell apart, exhausted; and were mute with astonishment, gazing at each other, when there first came to them, as from suddenly-opened heavens, the sound of voices, unaccompanied by any instrument, lifted in song:

“Thy kingdom come, O God!
Thy rule, O Christ, begin!
Break with Thine iron rod
The tyrannies of sin!

“Where is Thy reign of peace,
And purity, and love?
When shall all hatred cease? . . .”

The singers, clothed in white raiment, stood in a circle, those nearest the ocean shore facing away from it. Walt

and 'Chuck, running, stooped, to the base of the dunes, began with frantic contortions to clothe themselves.

“We pray Thee, Lord, arise . . .
Revive our longing eyes,
Which languish for Thy sight.”

The hymn tune, “St. Cecelia,” virtually a plain chant, carrying in its second bar a modulation to the dominant, returning to the tonic for an exquisitely ascending petition before the reposeful close, floated out over the vociferous ocean and ascended to the blue sky in which the gold flame of the sun burned with an unwavering radiance. The two young men, as if arrested by the perception of something bizarre yet touching, stood their ground, lips parted, eyes downcast.

“O'er heathen lands afar
Thick darkness broodeth yet.”

Afar, of course; and yet, somehow, just out of sight beyond the sparkling plain before them. Lands of strange temples and fantastic towers, of men with hideous faces, filed teeth, and women some of whom were completely veiled, some wholly unclad. The fresh, salty air of the sea deserted the nostrils which inhaled odious smells mingled with suave, spiced incense. . . . The pure voices of the women among the singers, clear-toned soprani, took up the last poetic words in which the prayer of the hymn was consummated and the faith of the petitioners most perfectly expressed:

“Arise, O morning Star,
Arise . . . and never set.”

Walt and Selah Mulford exchanged inquiring looks and nods. Then, without any words, they clambered up the slope.

II

There were about half a hundred people, pretty evenly divided between men and women with a sprinkling of children; the band of Adventists was led by the Reverend Mr. Sammis of Babylon; Zophar Wines and Temperance Wines were among them.

All without exception were attired in white but the garment, long, loose and flowing, varied considerably as to cut and material with the wearer. Some had apparently procured the finest linen; a few wore cheesecloth; the children had not kept spotless and even some of the adults exhibited rents and torn places where catbriar had caught them on their way to the dunes. Well out on the bay the two boats which had ferried over the pilgrims could be seen heading back to Babylon. Noting this, the Woodchuck whispered to Walt:

“D’ye suppose any of the crowd made a private arrangement to return, Walt, just in case—”

Walt answered with a twinkle but nudged for quiet. The Reverend Mr. Sammis was speaking:

“Dearly beloved brethren . . . ye know that the Book is sealed with seven seals . . . and it hath been foretold that as the seals are opened there shall appear four horses with riders . . . on the white horse rides a conqueror, on the red horse rides a slayer with sword, on the black horse is mounted famine, on the pale horse rides pestilence . . .

then are the saints apparelled in their white robes; the sixth seal being opened, there cometh a great earthquake; the sun blackens, the moon is as blood; the stars fall to earth as a fig-tree casteth her figs untimely when shaken of a mighty wind; the heaven departeth as a scroll rolled together and every mountain and island is moved from its place . . .”

The expressions on the faces ranged from entranced devotion to sweat-pouring terror. A frightened child wailed at even intervals; some trembled so they could not keep their feet. Walt and his fellow clutched each other, watching, listening, communicating by finger-grips their shared sense of the futile agony of the scene. Then Walt, with a shove, drew Selah Mulford away with him. In silence the two youths dropped down to the ocean shore and stumbled off toward the shack where they got their meals and slept. Once, as they went, Walt stopped; seemed to be listening; broke the quiet between them by throwing back his head for a prodigious laugh. . . .

12

The Woodchuck looked at him with curiosity but Walt offered no explanation of the laugh until bacon was sizzling in the pan. Then, as he poured out cider for both, he exclaimed:

“To-night! To-night . . .”

He refused to explain further. Through the afternoon, spent lounging on the ocean shore, they had an animated and curious debate, “for,” as Walt insisted, the corners of his mouth twitching a little, “we must follow the great his-

torical examples in the presence of Eternity—Socrates, as an instance. 'Chuck, consider that I am Socrates and have drained the cup of hemlock, and shape your dialogue accordingly! Let us converse on a high plane! "

"Then, O Socrates, you do not regard death as the greatest of evils?" inquired the Woodchuck, gravely.

"Aren't you forgetting my rôle?" asked Walt. "As Socrates, it is my place to put the questions and trip you up neatly on your answers."

"Forgive me, Socrates, and let me tell you that since you have swallowed that stuff, death can have but small terrors for you. For my part, I believe that it is easier to die than to endure what we saw those people enduring this morning."

"You say well, 'Chuck—er—Chuckibiades; for the terrors of anticipation exceed everything else. But tell me: You are youthful, high-spirited and turbulent, the cause of many public scandals in Bab—er—Athens, Long Island. Have you never thought that for excesses in one direction we invariably pay by extortions in another?"

"No, I had not made that reflection, Waltias."

"Well, does it not strike you, Chuckophon, that these people we saw have exceeded in the practice of some virtues with the result that they have been deprived of other virtues?"

"No doubt, Waltocles, but ought you not first to define virtue in general and then give us full particulars?"

"Virtue," said Walt, abandoning his rôle and studying a bit, "is—let me see. I'd say, Selah, that virtue in general is the highest common human factor, the greatest thing possible to all men and women."

“The greatest good of which all men and women are capable, you mean?”

“No! The greatest *thing*—positive trait or vital principle—they are capable of asserting in their lives.”

“Why not say: Virtue is the absence of vice?”

“What! Make virtue merely negative, and vice the positive force? Certainly not! Why, *Selah*, isn't that just the fatal error the churches, sects, so many religions fall into? They make evil a positive, active power in the world; they talk about righteousness but they make righteousness an empty void, lifeless and deadly, a condition of 'thou shalt not' do this, that or t'other. Prohibition is, of itself, useless in a living world, *Selah*. It can never be extended to cover all the positive, upspringing forms of life—weeds of evil, if you like. Take Zophar Wines. There is a commandment against theft but none against usury.”

“He has cancelled all his mortgages.”

“Good, good! At the end of his life, he has ceased to rob, has made restitution as of May 1, 1840, we will say.”

“I see—pretty late to weed the garden! Some of the weeds have seeded. . . . But I've heard you say you didn't believe in consequences?”

“Not just that! I've said what we call 'consequences' are simply guesses, after all. There is a Law always working—but we don't know it.”

“Shakespeare says, the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.”

“Shakespeare says what all men say in all circumstances, even to contradicting themselves. You can no more ex-

press the whole truth in a quotation than you can achieve perfection in a single human."

"Walt . . . you know, these days over here you've done me a lot of good."

"'Chuck, you're wrong! I've mebbe done you harm; if there's good it's because you've done yourself good! To live! After all, that's the only virtue, the only positive trait, vital principle. On the way here I ran across a boy and a girl"—he related, without reticence but with tenderness, the story of Jenny and Joel, finishing: "Jenny gave herself, obeyed her instinct which was a pure instinct and therefore infallible. Something positive, something lived, an assertion of herself! "

"But suppose he had been another kind. . . . And you tell me, Walt, you invited him to leave—run away with you? "

"How sneaking that was of me, wasn't it? But, you see, the evil I urged (evil, so-called) was a negative thing, powerless in the presence of the genuine, vital, positive, assertive *good* Jenny freely offered. The strength of virtue! Not in innocence, or restraint . . . negation, withholding. It lies in inspired, intuitive action, not reasoned, not bargaining, but giving, giving! . . . from an inner fund of inexhaustible good! "

13

They lay there and separately pondered. It seemed to Selah Mulford that Walt had expressed the whole truth, expressed it dangerously, indeed, for its perception by many intelligences—yet more completely than he had found it ex-

pressed in anything his own twenty years had heard or read. The undiluted truth, he thought he knew enough to assert, would always be dangerous. Any man who handled it, handled gunpowder. The truth, which alone could set men free, could very likely only do so by destroying them and all their world about them. The business of society was to keep the powder well-damped, drying a little now and then, permitting a slight evaporation so that a small amount of the explosive might be used judiciously. . . . The Woodchuck's test of the truth of what Walt had said was to apply it, imaginatively, to his own case. He was certain that if Temperance Wines could have once behaved as that girl Jenny had behaved he, Selah Mulford, would have had to respond to her as the youth Joel had responded—with the gift of his whole soul. For it was her soul that Jenny had given. . . . Preposterous? That was a word which could only be applied by those who, having given nothing, having received nothing, felt nothing. . . .

He looked at Walt, lying stretched on his back in the shelter they had found at the foot of the dunes, and wondered about him. Wondered what would become of a man so unusual, so strangely, richly endowed, so unafraid. He was a genius, of course; and whatever happened he would not remain obscure. Still, thought Selah Mulford, is it a genius that the world can use?

By his side Walt, sun-warmed and happy, was not thinking but attending absently to the sound of the ocean. He essayed, at first very unsuccessfully, to correlate the action of eye and ear. The eye saw certain undulations, the ear received various sounds. With words—poems—the effect

striven for was much the same. While the poet conjured up a picture of a scene or person, he endeavored at the same time and with an identical means, the words of his poem, to enlist, soothe, or perhaps trouble, agitate, the hearing. The problem was to make a pattern. . . .

People appreciated the smooth, regular sound of a waterfall who heard only a confused noise in the ocean. They liked stamped calicoes but could make nothing of a Turkey carpet. Yet almost as quickly as they became familiar with a pattern, they tired of it; wanted something more complex, different, to which they could return for new surprises and the constant re-discovery of order in apparent irregularity.

Rhythm. . . .

It compassed all human existence as the sea engirdled the main. Men explored Nature, seeking hidden patterns, animating rhythm; made laws . . . patterns; felt love . . . perceived the most glowing thread in the pattern they were studying, and followed it; were by faith enraptured . . . faith in a pattern to be unriddled for them; could not even conceive of their God apart from pattern, since they held Him to have made them in His own image.

O! about all this there is something little and canting, something less than human, something lifeless, dead, cramping as a cheap pattern! Let us, thinks Walt, concern ourselves only with the animation, the large, loose, irregular rhythm that underruns our world! How intolerable would this ocean be if it echoed the same set of sounds, played one fixed tune for the east winds, another for the west; if its recitation were in iambic pentameters for sunshine and,

muffled strokes, like a bell tolled, for storm! If one harkened minutely, carefully—

So harkening, one caught brief, occasional regularities of sound, recognizable rhythms but always detached, fragmentary, broken in upon, never allowed to become tagged or tiresome.

He recollected with a sense of astonishment the times he had raced up and down this beach or the equally lonely beach at Coney Island declaiming to the surf and seagulls by the hour—spouting Homer after the model of the practising Demosthenes, though doing it out of sheer exuberance, thrill, and not to master any part of the art of the orator. Jackass!

“ ’Chuck! ”

“ Eh? ”

“ Demosthenes was a fool. The ocean’s the only thing worth hearing with a pebble in its mouth. Instead of spouting just to hear himself talk, why didn’t he *listen?* ” A pause. “ He might have heard something ”—in a whisper.

14

Over supper they were two harum-scarum boys again.

“ To-night! ”

“ Well, what of to-night? You said that this afternoon. Going to join the Adventists up there, on the dunes? ”

“ Follow me.”

They went out into the darkness, a magnificent splendor as palpable as noonday, pierced aloft with the prised flame of stars, thinned, whitened by the low line of the surf. As yet, no moon. The shifting wind was now northwesterly,

but light, fitful. Walt, wetting his finger to detect the quarter whence it came, gave a satisfied murmur. "Pretty soon 'twill blow."

"A great rushing wind . . . from Heaven . . . to cleanse an impure world." Selah Mulford's tone was half-believing.

And for a moment they gripped each other, looking seaward where a ghostly foam played.

"It's unreal, isn't it?"

"Ah, it's beautiful . . . has its own reality."

They tramped along at the base of the dunes. A figure materialized out of the dusk in front of them. They came close, peered, and Selah Mulford exclaimed: "Why, it's Dan Dibble."

A pathetically disproportioned little man. He had divested himself of the white robe of the Adventists, carrying it, crumpled, in one hand. With the other he grasped and held them, his skinny fingers gathering in the cloth of their coats at the breast. The impression derived from the little man's thickened speech was one of terror mixed with unbelievable calculation.

"I see'd you," he declared confidentially to both the young men. "First-off, I see'd Selah; then I reckernized Walt, here. I guess you ain't expectin' anything to happen. The hour's three in the morning. Then a trumpet blast'll sound. I don't know's I kin say's I really look for . . . It. But mebbe it's jest as well to be ready. Only, I ain't ready. I—I've a good many sins on my conscience." He must have been shaking, for his hand, grasping first one then the other, trembled. "Ain't either 'f you making any

reckoning on the End?" He was obviously trying to see their faces, read what they felt.

"No," they admitted. He seemed doubtfully relieved.

"Well, I had to git away"—as if an apology were called for—"being as how it onnarves me so. Maybe I'll git back to 'em 'fore three o'clock. I been clost to death onct or twice and it didn't trouble me any; funny I feel so 'pset about *this*, ain't it? Some 'f 'em seem right happy; look on it as a deliverance out of their troubles. There's the Widder Tabe, who was by way of losin' her homestead; Zophar Wines was going to foreclose. Now he's cancelled the mortgage so she's safe whatever happens. Alsop Horton's getting a riddance o' that shrewish wife o' his'n, for he figgers either they'll be apart or else her nater'll be different. And so forth." His tone throughout was serious. He sighed. "Well, I won't detain you . . ."

He took a step, halted and came back to say in a lowered voice:

"Likely the one for whom it's the greatest deliverance out of her trouble is that daughter of Hannah Purrier's—you know, Sarah; the onmarried one . . ." And left abruptly.

Walt and Selah moved slowly on through the dusk.

"I can't sleep to-night; can you?"

"No."

A half-hour or so later, Walt was saying:

"It's a poor time to bring the world to an end—very poor! Look at this country of ours. It hasn't yet lasted out some men's lifetimes. There's old Rumsey Platt, who fought in '76. The life of a nation ought to exceed the long-

est life of any man, ought to span a couple of centuries; it can't be judged in less. These States are just an experiment so far."

"The last trump, blowing now, would be an awful disappointment to the Whigs. They're counting on November."

"If the last trump blows I hope the devil'll take both our political parties! They're a perversion of democracy, they cumber the earth! Our representative government is half a century old, exactly, and already there's a parasitic growth. . . . Spoils! Spoils of office! Why, Selah, there's more than one lust that can canker society! I fear, yet hope, for the success of our experiment. Look at all the centuries behind us in which men had, for the most part, only their private concerns, all public matters being beyond their control or grasp. Only when misgovernment became unendurable did they interfere, make public affairs their affair. You know, in founding this nation, we as much as said to ourselves that human nature could be changed—could be broadened. The proverb is: What's everybody's business is nobody's business. This republic asserts the principle that what's everybody's business can be made each individual's business. Can it? Ah, it's too early yet to tell! I hope so—but I have fears about it. Why? Because men and women, so many of them, don't, can't, won't manage their own affairs with wisdom. You think I mean property? Well . . . perhaps I mean property, but scarcely the kind you imagine. Not worldly goods; chattels. No—lives! There's only one kind of property assured to each man and each woman, and that's a body and

soul (I don't like the habit of making a sharp division between the two; body and soul are fleshed together and no real distinction between them is possible—wouldn't be useful if we could make it). Do men and women take care of the one precious thing that's theirs? do they procure healthy bodies? perfect, expand their souls? How many? Even in this grand, new country with all its breadth of outdoors—mountains, waters, climates, forests, fertile soils—men and women, too many of them, live by outworn customs, ape the habits and thoughts of the past, deliberately, as it seems, enslave themselves to all sorts of superstitions and think the only kind of property worth having is the kind that's outside themselves. . . . To get that they will rob themselves! Ain't it foolish, damnable? to think a man would rob himself, or a woman would rob herself, of health, happiness, home-fruit, children, clean-souledness, a full and vigorous enjoyment, feasting on life, to get something he or she don't need?"

Incredulous contempt rang in Walt's voice. . . .

15

Sometime after midnight they approached cautiously the dune of the Adventists. The moon was out, disclosing the band very plainly. The embers of a small fire of driftwood glowed in the center of an irregular circle of sleepers. For one and all, wearied with a day- and nightlong vigil, men, women and frightened children had sunk to rest. Rest? At any rate they were motionless and some were unmistakably past consciousness. Walt and the Woodchuck stood looking at them for some time.

“What deviltry have you been meaning, all along, Walt, with your ‘To-night, to-night!’ D’you think to blow a fish-horn along about three o’clock?”

“You come along, ‘Chuck, over towards the bay side.”

They worked their way through scrub and brush and emerged on the edge of a sedge meadow. The fine grass was still mostly the withered brown of last year’s late growth. Again Walt noted the direction of the wind, still northwest but much stronger. Then he bent down and fired the meadow.

“Wish I *had* a loud fish-horn, ‘Chuck!”

But the Woodchuck, suddenly comprehending all, was helpless with rather scandalized laughter .

A dense cloud of stifling smoke formed quickly and was carried by the wind, mostly undiluted, directly over the white-robed sleepers. The mischief-makers, scampering, got to the vicinity of the dune in time to hear the first asphyxiated cough. Suddenly from the midst of the smoke-field there came, in the recognized voice of Daniel Dibble, a loud and clear pronouncement:

“Here we all are in *hell!*” Then the conclusion, bitter but philosophical—“jest as I expected!”

16

“I’d ought to be kicked.”

Walt spoke penitently, yet he looked impenitent still, and both he and Selah Mulford laughed when the Woodchuck agreed:

“Yes, you ought. What say, I get Dan Dibble to do it?”

“All is for the best in the worst possible world. That’s a reasonable conclusion to arrive at, ain’t it? Zophar Wines is clean-slated, able to start life afresh as an honest man; the Widow Tabe has a roof that may leak but won’t be lifted unless by hurricane; even Dan Dibble’s mind is easier.”

“How about Alsop Horton? Is he happier?”

“Who knows but his wife’ll cease to nag him, after this ordeal they’ve gone through together?”

“What did the Reverend Sammis say whilst you talked with him this morning, Walt?”

Walt’s palm smote his thigh. He rocked a little. Then, with seriousness:

“That’s a wonderful man! I do admire that preacher! It seems that he holds the end of the world *did* come, jest as forecasted. Yes! He said to me, ‘It looks like the same world, but it ain’t—isn’t!’ He’d even preached a short sermon to ’em, explaining that, as daylight was coming on. He’d said: ‘Brethren, I was wrong—we all were wrong—in one sense; but in another and a better sense we were right! The end of everything hasn’t come in the manner we persuaded ourselves it was coming. Why? I’m convinced it’s because we misunderstood what is meant by the Second Coming. I’m convinced that what, all along, has been meant is the coming of the Lord Christ into our human hearts. I believe He has come, is coming, into the hearts of all of us—will enter if we don’t wilfully bar Him out. And if that is so, then the world we knew has indeed come to an end and a Judgment has taken place and a new Life is beginning for each one of us. If that is true, and it rests

with each one of us to make it true, then the thing for us to do is to go back to Babylon and convince our neighbors, by our daily lives and our every act, that something more marvelous has happened than the thing we dreamed of—and in this particular Change they will *have* to believe! ’

“ I call that great gospel, great, great! ” finished Walt.

He and the Woodchuck were again alone on the beach. Boats manned by the curious and skeptical, appearing from across the bay that morning, had ferried home the group of Adventists.

“ That explains why they none of them seemed shamefaced or angry when they were loading. Mr. Sammis’s good talk must have plucked them up powerfully, ” commented Selah Mulford. He added: “ Well, here we are alone again with a fine subject of conversation lost to us. Conversation? How long ’ve we been over here, Walt? This is the tenth day, isn’t it? By Jefferson! ”

“ What? ”

“ Here we’ve spent ten days together, with some downright outspokenness betwixt the two of us, but— Well! All I can say is, I never in my life spent as long as ten hours—out gunning or anything like that—with another fellow or fellows and not been told a half-dozen smutty stories! ” He put his head to one side, adding quizzically: “ Don’t you *know* any smutty stories? ”

“ I don’t like ’em, ” Walt answered, shortly. “ If others want to tell ’em, they can (as you say, they mostly do). Why the devil people can’t think and behave candidly about sex, is beyond me. Sex contains—all; body and soul; mean-

ings and proofs and purities. Don't you feel it so, 'Chuck? I do believe the real impurity is of the mind; maybe it comes of an undeveloped spirituality, the soul's arrested growth. A man or a woman may commit an act impure (or so called) and yet be and remain better, sweeter, more wholesome *and more honest!* than another man or woman of irreproachable conduct but diseased spirituality, soiled mind, dwarfed, shriveled imagination."

"Oh, by the way, Walt—"

Selah Mulford checked himself, but soon went on:

"I didn't see anything of that girl Dan Dibble spoke about last night, did you?"

"In the boatloads this morning? Who was she?"

"Sarah Purrier. She's the youngest daughter of old Hannah Purrier. You remember Dan Dibble said he guessed likely the end o' everything would be a greater deliverance for her than for most."

"I wouldn't know her," said Walt, thoughtfully, "unless—Dibble's tell would . . . be enough to go on. Wasn't she with her mother?"

"Hannah Purrier wasn't along."

"Sammis—he'd look after her."

"He might have overlooked her absence. You see, Walt, I—I don't believe very many know, yet. . . ."

"You think she wasn't with 'em this morning?"

"I'm sure of it." The Woodchuck spoke with formed conviction. "I looked 'em all over, interested to see how they were taking things. Lord, Walt! You don't suppose anything's happened to her, do you? She can't have stayed here on the beach, can she?"

The thought intimidated them both, stood in their eyes.

Walt spoke quietly:

“We’ll have to search and make sure. She couldn’t have . . . in the disappointment— But we won’t talk, we’ll travel!”

The quest was never begun. A sound outside the door made them turn. The girl, Sarah Purrier, appeared framed in the doorway, gave a dismayed sound at the sight of them, tried to steady herself with one hand and collapsed on the sill before Walt’s quick leap could bring his arm about her.

17

She was conscious as they lifted her up, her eyes wide with anguish, and after they had laid her on the shakedown bed she began quietly sobbing. The Woodchuck, male and helpless, stood awkwardly looking down at the girl; but Walt exhibited an instant gentleness and tenderness like a woman’s. He sat beside the bed, on the floor, and took and held her hand; his gray-blue eyes, clear, direct and unwavering, fastened on hers. After a while her sobs ceased, the long-lashed lids drooped. But Walt made very sure she was soundly asleep before he disengaged her hand and rose to his feet noiselessly, beckoning to Selah Mulford. They tiptoed outside and whispered.

“What’ll we do with her, Walt?”

“Take her home as soon as she’s slept and had a bite to eat. I want to talk with her—can maybe help her a little.”

“Gosh almighty! I couldn’t talk with her; it’s as much as I can do to look at her. Don’t believe I could look in those eyes, square. They—they make a fellow feel as if he

were somehow guilty, as if he were to blame for all the wickedness all men ever did."

"It's not Sarah Purrier looks at you from those eyes, Selah, but a creature unmercifully dealt with. You may see the same look in the eyes of a dying doe or in the eyes of a child who doesn't understand his punishment. It's the hurt—too often mortal—to the soul."

"The fellow ought to be killed!"

"That doesn't go deep enough. She must be encouraged to live! . . . don't you see?"

"No, damn me if I do!" exclaimed the Woodchuck, wrathfully. "What's life going to hold for her hereafter except pain and misery and disgrace and sorrow?"

"A child."

"And what'll life hold for her child, tell me?"

"Love. . . . That's all life holds for any of us, when you stop to think, isn't it so, Selah?"

18

After a few hours she awoke. The completeness of her exhaustion had been overcome, and a little food revived her further. She sat, her eyes fixed on Walt's with a look that had regained something of her own personality. He held her hand lightly closed in his own. They were alone, Selah Mulford having made the excuse that he would get the small boat ready.

"You wandered away from the others early this morning?"

"I—I couldn't bear the disappointment. To know I had to go on living! to face . . . to go through with—~~it~~— I

thought I would drown myself. I walked down to the ocean . . . but as I stood looking at the water, I knew I couldn't go through with that, either."

The words were produced with difficulty. The look of anguish flitted across her eyes.

"Isn't it likely—now—the worst is all over?" he asked gently. "We don't live through any experience twice; and what's been lived *through* has been *lived* through."

She was silent, but her eyes seemed to draw strength from the steadiness of his.

"*He* knows?" She nodded.

"And has offered to do nothing?" A second nod.

Walt considered; said, in an even tone:

"Perhaps he can be persuaded to offer something."

"No!" burst from her. "He never pretended he loved me." Her tone was stricken. "I thought I loved him, until I told him and he denied . . . then I knew I didn't love him. It was just as if he were dead and buried, and . . . the other one wasn't here yet to love. Will I love it? How can I?" A shudder took her.

"Steady!" Then when she was controlled:

"Love it? You've got to love it so boundlessly, the world will seem bright to it. Your love has got to guard and protect . . ."

A returning hail proclaimed that the little catboat was ready.

The sail across was marked by desultory talk between Walt and Selah Mulford. At Babylon, Walt took Sarah Purrier home.

Hannah Purrier looked at the young man with acute sus-

picion. But those gray-blue eyes were disarmingly innocent . . . unnoticing; the voice was merely careless-courteous.

“ Brought your daughter home safe and sound, Mrs. Purrier! So much excitement and confusion this morning the boats got off without her.”

Hannah Purrier replied amiably. . . . Mr. Whitman, the one that had taught school here two winters back, to be sure! . . . always seemed a respectable, nice young man.

19

“ Good-by, 'Chuck.”

“ Good-by. . . . Where you heading for, Walt? ”—asked wistfully.

Walt looked puzzled; shrugged, and laughed.

“ Wish I knew, 'Chuck! Or—no. Guess I'd rather be spontaneous; surprise myself. I've a thought of going east a ways, might even revisit Montauk. You sure you won't come? ”

The eyes in the clean, idealistic face of Selah Mulford were slightly somber; had lost their usual look of comprehension replied to by a light defiance of things seen. One foot, pivoted on the heel, turned slowly, crushing gravel.

“ Something I've got to study out here.”

Their hands had been lingering in a farewell clasp. They exchanged a direct gaze. Suddenly they clung together, kissed and swiftly separated. Walt struck east with gathering strides. At the bend of the road he looked back, waved and shouted.

Selah Mulford answered the gesture but not the hail.

When, half a moment later, the road was empty except for a handful of stirred-up dust now settling back into place, he turned and walked steadily until he came to Hannah Purrier's cottage. The struggle that was going on in him seemed to be intensified at the sight of the low-roofed cottage, close to a patch of tall, smooth-columned pine trees like an improvised chapel erected as an adjunct of a natural shrine. The image pleased him, for he had come with the intention, nascent but emerging, of offering sanctuary. At the thought he was both exalted and terrified.

He tried, as he walked past, to review the situation with a certain calculated clearness. Since those hours yesterday his mind had scarcely left the subject of Sarah Purrier. It had never occurred to him to think of her abstractly. His mind had been fixed quite steadily on her person. The look in her eyes when she had first confronted Walt and himself. Her undeniable prettiness, which had now taken on an aspect strange to his lifelong glimpses of her, so that she appeared no longer a distinctly pretty girl but a woman of a quite inexplicable and impossible sort of beauty. Through a sleepless night his new vision of Sarah Purrier had steadily elaborated itself.

He remembered her as a shy thing, not at all the kind to encourage advances. He supposed that, if she had a lover, or if one came to her in the rôle of a lover, all the generous instincts in her must probably have been set vibrating with such violence as to alter the whole pitch of her nature. She would never be the same again, but it might very well be that the tone of her, nerves re-strung and her emotions retuned, would be better, more golden, with a

fuller resonance and a surer octave. The young man indulged in this figure from an intuitive comparison with the violin which he sometimes played at home, but very unsatisfactorily. It was a Cremona instrument, acquired over a century earlier by an ancestor whose mercantile enterprises had necessitated many visits to Genoa and whose Italian wife, of the family of the Marchesi Brignole, may have infused into the English strains of the Mulfords that touch of unrest and desire which alters temper into temperament.

Temper is fixed, but it was through the medium of his own special temperament that Selah Mulford saw Sarah Purrier. And so seen she had become to him, overnight, perplexingly, tormentingly desirable. He was aware, though only faintly, of the sensuous appeal she had for him; what really weighed was a complicated tissue of emotional conceptions threatened by conventional doubts which he hated even as he forcedly entertained them. Who was the father of her child? As if that could matter in the light of his new insight upon her! Did he love her? If not, why was he suffering now? and what was the meaning of this uncontrollable impulse to offer sanctuary? Why this exaltation at the thought of her consenting? of embracing her? and why the terror lest the dominant impulse moving him be only a brief assertion of the instinct of nobility and a sentimental satisfaction of the instinct to sacrifice? In a flash of profounder self-understanding he saw himself as merely a victim of circumstances—a youth depressed by his own weak indulgences, numbed by the misadventure of his betrothal to Temperance Wines, revived, warmed by his contact with

Walt and flung in all his helplessness into this desperate but beautiful adventure. He saw this, but yet not even all this mattered. . . .

He had passed the cottage and, unconsciously turning, had come back and now found himself in front of it again. A figure stood alone under the pines.

His hand lifted the latch of the gate. A shadowy realization of how communicatively he must explain came over him. With Temperance, there had been no need to explain; expression was impliedly an impropriety. But this?

His memory roused, as if summoned to help him in a supreme moment. It echoed words of a few days before:

“He puts things in their attitudes,
He puts *to-day!* out of himself . . . with plasticity . . . and
love . . .

What can be answered he answers, and what cannot be answered he shows how it cannot be answered.”

There was that, then, to do . . . this day and forever more.

The gate swung open.

20

The lesson of the open road, as Walt saw it this May morning, was one of reception without either preference or denial. “They pass—I also pass—none can be interdicted.” The road had a cheerful voice and a man might travel on it to the end of his days, right happily.

Ah . . . and will I? he wondered.

“Don’t venture . . . if you leave me you are lost!”

He cast a quick glance about him. No one in sight. But whose voice, then, had spoken?

"I am already prepared . . . I am well-beaten . . . safe."

What the devil! Did the road from Babylon lead to Damascus? Was this cheerful voice of the road with its gay, fresh accent and its easy sentiment the summons to repentance? It plainly urged him to stifle his inclination to divagate, to strike off over a bit of untraveled country, an impulse he was continually obeying for a purpose he was far from being clear about. Those who wished to arrive anywhere in the world took care to stick to the well-beaten road.

"I am not afraid to leave you," he said aloud, but indecisively.

The highways of existence led to a comfortable and prosperous termination, he supposed. They proceeded through one of the many descriptions of love or lust by way of marriage and regularized industry to the goal of a wife, a habitation and accumulated moneys; but chiefly to the goal of an indestructible self-satisfaction. This was not to say it was always easy traveling—one usually encountered bad going and large numbers found the highway impassable. The one supreme advantage accruing to each road-taker and road-sticker was that nobody ever prosecuted him for trespass. He might be balked or helped, in distress or breakdown be left unaided, the right of way might be denied him unless and until he asserted and forced it; but he never had to be forgiven.

Forgiveness was the one quality that man collectively could not feel. A man might forgive his brother, a woman her sister; but men could not forgive their road-departing

brothers; women were incapable of extending to their errant sisters the absolution of forgiveness.

Then, since he who wandered would not escape a sentence and its fulfilment, how strong must be the inner compulsion upon him to make him deliberately abandon the main-traveled road!

All this, he assured himself in a reflective interval, was not just idle theorizing nor fanciful speculation. Soon, on the last day of this Fifth Month, 1840, just beginning, Walt Whitman would be twenty-one. As the custom of the country and period stood, he would then be very definitely a full-grown man. Physically he had reached his good height and maturity a half-dozen years since. Mentally he still felt very much unfledged, though conscious of a development beyond that of the run of twenty-one-year-olds. Emotionally he was aware of being specially endowed; though this was a doubtful advantage and one too readily operating as a handicap. Emotion, in the fullest sense, was a freight of quicksilver, always spilling and darting in a thousand directions, forever luring the carrier off the smooth, recognized road and into ditches and past no-trespass signs.

At twenty-one and at least half the time before reaching twenty-one most men of his generation had married, were regularly occupied and had acquired or were acquiring a home. He, Walt Whitman, was none of these nor with the prospect of any of them.

Not that this irked him. It was not that. But the road, with its high signification of one accepted route, had set him thinking. He felt (and therefore knew with the only

sure knowledge, certitude) that he must give the problem fairest consideration.

The first milestone on the road was marriage.

Very many of the men and women of my time, reflected Walt, look upon marriage simply as a means to an end. I think they are right; for those who take that view, undoubtedly that is all marriage is or can be. Every man and woman strives for self-satisfaction and for most men and women self-satisfaction is derived from a tolerable partnership, cohabitation, the mutually constructed home, children, the owned bit of ground and well-constructed house, money or other reasonable bulwarks securing the comfort of old age. That is good, sound, healthful! No thing finer than this, the lived Poem of average lives!

With a lesser number, marriage is an end in itself. They are those who love, like the boy Joel. . . . Marriage, so felt, must be a life-long ecstasy, an unfolding flower, the renewed sound of the loveliest music. There will always be a freshness about it. It will be like this morning for wonder and like the sound of the ocean for praise. All the usual offices of life will be performed and all the ends so valued by most men and women achieved—or if any are neglected, go unarrived at, they never have had significance and cannot have any.

He compared the two journeyings to travel by land, always comfortably in sight of dependable landmarks, and deep-sea voyaging where the shifting stars, the shape of the earth, the service of the winds were solely to be relied on, where the repose of the soul was in faith, in the sub-

stance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. . . .

And in the full flood of poetic thought, the crest of the great wave of emotion, Walt thought: I must embark on the deep-sea voyage! Let me only love! and let me but fix upon a single object of all the inexhaustible and pure feeling I know to exist within me! Let me think, believe, that a woman waits for me even as I seek unweariedly for her. . . . Let me but find her, losing not an instant. . . .

His wistfulness was so great upon him that he walked the road unevenly, with a lagging step and fingers that closed and unclosed and a mouth not steady. He felt a sense of hunger and a sense of pain.

The thought of Esther Terry came upon him so suddenly as to blur things before his eyes.

21

He had to give up, and sat down by the roadside, feeling faint and dizzy.

Why had he not thought of the daughter of Freegift Terry before? He, who had spent that whole past winter teaching in the valley where was her home, who had lived for the last month in that home? How explain it, this blindness? or how account for it, this instant's revelation?

She was seventeen, he, twenty-one. Her face, her whole person, reproduced itself before him. He saw the blue irises of her eyes, each flecked with golden-brown so that in the sunlight they lost their naïve and timid look and

appeared to dance, though veiledly. The slight roundedness of her shoulders appealed for pillowing on a firm young breast and the smooth shapeliness of her forearm was made to clasp about her lover's bared throat. And all that coiled, saddle-colored hair. . . .

He checked himself, flushing.

Of her face, the modeling of the features, he remained uncertain; but she had the frank smile that had made him love the boy Freegift, youngest of her three brothers but older than she. She had no sisters.

She was more intelligent than her brothers, or no, perhaps not that, but she had seemed more perceptive in his relations with the family; it had been easier to kindle her interest than that of the others in the things that interested himself—themes of outdoors and themes brought up by the few books Walt had and sometimes read from, aloud. She was seventeen, a farmer's daughter not living in any of the villages; certainly a year at the most would see her betrothed, probably married—settled down, beginning to travel the well-beaten road. . . . It would make, at the outset of her journey, anyway, a difference to her with whom she traveled.

Here and now Walt felt for the first time the pitch of compassion, which is the pity that understands and, sharing a level lifts it to be a summit. Compassion, as ever with youth, unaccompanied by resignation; compassion, with quiet acceptance or rebellious defiance, unvaryingly sublime. . . . Compassion, that brings a man and a woman together and then sets these twain forever apart. . . .

It was not a question of whether he could love her, but only of whether his love could come to her.

At once he felt the supreme hopelessness of making her feel his love and the vast incertitude of whether she could love him.

An abyss opened. Was he right? Was this love? Was he merely the victim of his own emotional nature. Something, perhaps the very intensity of what he had been feeling, flung him down from an immeasurable height. He was left stunned.

After a while he rose, stood up straight and looked at the broad and pleasant road—vista—ahead of him. It led somewhere. But there was a finer thing, the joy, the preciousness of making the journey together.

Tears came to his eyes; the immense wistfulness, the acute shock, the devastating sense of loneliness felt for the first time he could ever remember, the torture of uncertainty all descended on him, seemed to strike at his heart and brain. And yet he felt not an impulse to return to the valley, but a terror lest he were still too near to it. He had to set his teeth, as he went on eastward, to keep from running—running, running, till he could run no more.

Not to hail another wayfarer, or respond to salutation, was to stir suspicion. In succession Walt fell in with a hare-brained youth who had been digging in different spots on Long Island in search of buried treasure; a negro slave fugitive from South Carolina but here able to go about

openly; a Whig politician (middle-aged, paunched and incessantly taking snuff so that he sneezed and lost the important words in anything you said); and a handsome young fellow, bronzed and earringed, who was heading for Sag Harbor to sign for a whaling cruise.

Conversation was reduced to that lowest common denominator, the weather and crop prospects, but after a while the treasure-hunter declared:

“Good country, this Island; yet I’m hankering to get back to Illynoise.”

“You from Illinois?” asked Walt, interestedly.

“Yep; from Springfield. It’s the capital. Say, you ought to see *our* State! We’ve got *room!*”

“Achoo! What you come back here for, then?” the Whig inquired.

“So that’s what a sneeze sounds like! I ain’t heard one in years. Out West it’s so vast you can’t hardly hear anything unless a man’s making a political speech.”

“Tippecanoe and Tyler too!” chanted the Whig piously.

“That’s what old Abe was talking, last I saw of him,” mused the Illinoisan.

“Who?”—from Walt.

“Fellow named Lincoln—Abe Lincoln. Friend o’ mine out in Springfield. He ain’t really old, not more’n about thirty. We just call him that. Fact is, Abe’s got the oldest-lookin’ face ever was seen on a young man. It’s sort of furrowed, like plowed-up land. We-l-ll”—in a thoughtful drawl—“there was a girl he met some years ago back there in New Salem, and she took and died. I d’ know’s it’s to be wondered at if Abe *is* Abe. . . .”

"What's he do; I mean, what's his line?" asked the Whig, recovering from fresh attacks of snuff.

"Abe's a lawyer; he's in the Illinois Legislature."

The politician shook his head. "Never heard of him," he remarked indifferently.

Walt thought he would ask the Illinoisan more about that other fellow later. So the girl had died . . . his thought rested for a moment on Esther Terry, but only lightly. The sweat he had been in a half-hour earlier was over; and if he could not think of love without incertitude, death was a thing that had no reality at present. Surprisingly the voice of the earringed young sailor rang out:

"You were talking about your vastnesses out West—you, there. Go afloat with me and I'll show you a plain that swamps your prairie!"

"No money in that," came the retort. "I'd sooner look for pirate treasure on Long Island than for a needle in a haystack; and for a needle in a haystack than for a whale in the ocean."

"No money, eh? That's because you've never seen a payday at the end of a three-year voyage with all hands sharing in the profits!"

All this while the fugitive slave had kept with them in pedestrian silence. Now, however, with the whites of his eyes showing, he asked the sailor:

"Is mebbe chance for black man, suh, on bo'd ship-whaler?"

"Why not? New Bedford's full of South Sea Islanders—Fijians and Erromangoans and the devil knows who not. I was up there to get a berth; stopped o'ernight at the

Spouter Inn and the landlord says: 'I'll have to sleep ye with another. Ye haven't any objections to sharing a harpooneer's blanket, have ye?' I had an objection to sharing anybody's blanket, but 'twas no go; and may I never have been a school teacher if the fellow didn't turn out to be a tattooed cannibal!"

"You must 'a' stood about as much chance of sleep as a stump-tailed bull in flytime," compared Walt, adding: "But you say you've taught school? I've been doing that. My name's Whitman—Walt Whitman."

"Herman Melville. Where do you belong to?"

"Here. I was born over on the north shore. You?"

"You're a Long Islander, I'm a Narrow Islander. Behold, sir, a native of the insular city of Manhattoes, *anno Domini* 1819."

"So! We're the same age."

"And if I'm not mistaken"—the sailor was regarding Walt keenly—"of somewhat the same temper."

"I like—people. Think I should probably have been quite fond of your cannibal companion."

"Why, I grew to be—not too close. New Bedford's a sweet place, full of maples—long avenues of green and gold. In August grand horse-chestnuts flower forth, like colossal candelabra all lighted."

"Oh, how good an image!" Walt exclaimed. "Do you write? You must! I've a yearning to, myself, one day."

"Aye, I'll be having some yarns and some thoughts to put on paper, later," was the reflective answer. "Have you read Emerson's *Nature*?"—with a swift glance.

"Haven't I! 'The sun shines to-day also,'" quoted

Walt. "There's the man and the voice for this country of ours!"

"I heard Father Taylor preach at the sailors' Bethel in Boston and talked with him afterward. He says Emerson is 'one of the sweetest souls God ever made, but he knows the New Testament no more than Balaam's ass knew grammar.' I remarked that Balaam's ass seems to have made himself understood, spite of grammatical deficiencies. There'll be those who will understand Emerson, too."

"Understand him and love him!"

"A man named Hawthorne up that way I took a strong liking to," continued Melville. "Shy, solitary; bent, he says, upon learning how to write. He has done some stories which he calls *Twice-Told Tales*, very delicate but beautiful. Says himself they are 'flowers which blossomed in too retired a shade.'"

"That sounds like Edgar Poe."

"I think the two have something in common, though I am pretty sure they do not know each other, only each other's work. Yet it's unlikely Poe has read anything of Hawthorne's."

"What do you make of Poe?"

"Why, not much. Too unhealthy. I've seen him once or twice in New York. It's a face without sunlight."

"Is he the fiend you hear about? Or just a being cursed with his own nature, like Burns? Yet there's much that's healthy and fine in Burns's songs."

"Poe's no fiend, but it may be there's a curse upon him. I don't share your taste for Burns. Up Boston way they're all by way of forming a new group, intellectually speak-

ing. Emerson fathers it, spiritually—Emerson and Carlyle, whom he makes so much of—but stands aloof from the others, like Bronson Alcott, who are all for practical details—practical or impractical, I'm sure I don't know which. There is talk of a convention to be held in Boston to settle something, nobody knows just what, or rather, no half-dozen agree. Some want Abolition, some a new religion, others to confiscate land. Hawthorne told me that even Emerson admitted there were 'madmen, mad women, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-Outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and—philosophers.' ”

Walt threw back his head in hearty laughter. The man from Illinois, overhearing in spite of the Whig politician's nasal interruptions a part of the catalogue, observed:

“ Out West we say: ‘ I'll try anything once.’ ”

“ By the shade of John Harvard! ” retorted the sailor. “ That's nothing. Up Boston way they're in the mood to try *everything at once!* ”

“ All this nonsense about Abolition is bad for the country,” declared the Whig politician, shortly.

“ What's good for humanity can't be bad for any country ”—from Walt.

“ Humanity be hanged! We've got to think of the United States.”

“ There will be plenty to say that in this century and the next century—in every century,” Walt answered. “ But

America means opportunity. Opportunity, like charity, begins at home; shall it stop there?"

The Whig said sententiously: "Slavery is an institution."

"So was King George III. But we got rid of him."

"An unhappy parallel. After all, when you destroy slavery you abolish a right in private property. . . ."

The two argued for some time, Walt affirming finally:

"'Tis hopeless, our talking, hopeless! The deeper we get, the farther we go apart. Institutions are little to me; men and women are everything! . . ."

23

Toward noon the group disintegrated, the Whig stopping at a roadside tavern, the treasure-hunter striking off on a road south with the plan of crossing the bay that afternoon, and the fugitive negro going with him as far as the old manor of the Nicolls, where freemen of his race awaited him. Melville and Walt made a meal by the wayside, each having bread, cheese and cider with him. Then they lay stretched in the shade of a hollowed-out boundary ditch and compared enthusiasms.

"I love the sea," explained Melville. "It cures my fits of spleen. There are times when I hate the land and everybody on shore. And when I go to sea, I take good care to go as a simple sailor, plumb down into the fore-castle and right aloft to the royal masthead. There's medicine in being thumped and ordered about, just as there's medicine in the pure air you breathe on the fo'c's'le head."

"I'd relish that life," conceded Walt. "There's medicine in it for the body, as you say, and there must be, too, for the soul. For you and me, anyway." He hesitated: "I was thinking earlier this day how mystical a deep-sea passage must be." Thus he guarded his full thought by not revealing its application. He went on: "What is the sea but a field for pioneering? The day will come when every mile of land will have been explored and either settled or forgotten. Where, then, shall men pursue the life of adventure? In the air, perhaps; in the exciting quests of the laboratory and the study, no doubt; on the sea, as always, for certain sure."

"What I like best about the sea"—Melville took up the analysis—"is: It abolishes success."

A stranger appearing in a company of familiars attracts instant notice. Walt was all attention. In the midst of worthy but known friends, here stood a new idea! Melville smiled and proceeded to effect an introduction:

"Society being what it is," he said, "a man, ashore, is judged, not by his worth, by the stuff he shows to be in him, but by his success."

"But he must be worthy, must have stuff in him, to win success, mustn't he? "

"Ah, we know better than that! "

"What measures success?" demanded Walt.

"The new, arriving gauge seems to be money," Melville said, after some reflection, "at least, in New York. In Boston, perhaps some special talent or some preposterous idea." He smiled. "Throughout the South it is family; but family and wealth are there synonymous. Of course

we have, except for the South, abolished in this country what you might call hereditary success—men and women born to the purple. Success in all ages and among all men from the beginning of the race has been accredited to the man who acquired a beautiful wife. There has never, I suppose, been a time when the male who had for his very own a lovely woman did not excite the envy of all other men—and the excitation of envy is the proof of a man's success. Isn't it?" He thrust the question home.

"I may envy another his vast though tragic experience of life. I may envy a man his happiness, though he has nothing else and has never had anything else," Walt remonstrated.

"But still—you are envious. The thing you envy is a form of success," insisted Melville.

"At sea, as on a frontier, the thing called 'success' simply does not exist," continued the sailor. "It is always and only a matter of a man's stuff. Is the stuff in him? Can he do his work properly? If so, all right, whatever the outcome. But if not, all wrong. You see? He cannot 'succeed.' The thought of envying him would never arise. There is no money to make—I am speaking of the *sailor*—and there is no 'career.' There is not even the deadly illusion that shadows the performance of a man on the land. I mean the illusion that his 'success' was achieved wholly or mainly by his own qualities and exertions."

"You're somewhat of a fatalist," commented Walt, his head on one side, his eyes lowered. And he went on, in the manner of calm negligence: "Then you make no exception in favor of success in love?"

The sailor frowned; said: "I know nothing about that." His "that" had a ring of something so close to envy as made Walt smile, surmise and wonder if here were not a case for pity. . . . Melville was saying, with a touch of harshness:

"The acquisition—exclusive possession—of a lovely woman, which I spoke of as one of the incitements to envy, has not necessarily anything to do with love. I suppose love is the one thing in the world which cannot be recognized from outside." But this was more question than assertion.

"Oh . . . others can recognize it." And Walt thought again of Jenny and Joel. "Fact is, I suspect you've got the truth just turned inside out; and that others may recognize it first. The hardest thing must be for the lover to know when he or she loves. Very often, anyway! We aren't trained to look in upon ourselves, not exactly; isn't that true?"

"You and I are both in-lookers, of course." Melville had an air of advancing a piece on a chessboard.

"We should know when we love, you mean? I want to get at the process. Is an ideal first formed and is some one person then made to enclose it, or arrayed in it, or illumined by it as by a powerful light projected upon her or him? Give me your idea."

Struck by a note in Walt's voice, the sailor asked:

"You are not inquiring for ——— This is just a theme adrift between us? a speculation loose and running free? There's no bowline in the bight and t'other end of our

talk, if we ever reach it, isn't clove-hitched to your thought, your meditated action?"

"What matter?" Walt tried to speak carelessly, but found he couldn't.

"Ah, answer enough," exclaimed the sailor. "Let me tell you what I think. It is this: Love may sometimes be arrived at; not always. But there is a stage, consciously or unconsciously, beyond which the affair passes out of our hands; a change comes in the personality; a stage of growth has been reached."

This was to Walt a new and wonderful insight; inwardly he quivered with excitement and the buoyancy of his voice was lost; he spoke with a sort of difficulty like a man chagrined for words:

"I wonder if one's real, inner Self doesn't suffer a loss of some kind? I wonder if, in some moments, at least, a man who loves doesn't feel that some part of his Self has irrecoverably gone from him? If he hasn't a sense of a sort of violation of the Self strangely like a violation of the body? . . . I wonder!"

"He is no longer wholly himself? I mean: His Self is not any more entirely, uniquely his own? He is partly that other one and that other one is partly him? Yes, I think that is how it strikes home. That is how it would have to strike home to you and me, to all the in-lookers, to the empiricists, to the transcendentalists, to the mystics among mankind. Yes, that would have to be true," agreed Melville.

"How finely suggestive you are! And that other ex-

pression of yours," Walt resumed, "about a stage of growth having been reached. That would be a change in the mind, in the whole emotional structure like the change of the body in adolescence. Don't you guess so? A man's emotions could never be the same any more; they would have changed pitch for good like the voice of the growing boy. He would think about all things differently. And if his love were in any way frustrated? met disappointment? what then? oh, what then?"

A cry escaped Melville, but an instant later he was laughing lightly and saying:

"What then, O my friend Whitman? What then? Why—religion, or lust, or the muddy river, or the ruthless reach for money, or a bullet in the breast in battle, or the extreme unction of the all-merciful sea! What then? What then? What then? Oh, my God . . . what . . . then?"

And with a gesture which conveyed both farewell and a cutting adrift, the sailor strode ahead on the road alone.

24

Thus passes the light of the world! thought Walt, and he lay in the ditch, as if numbed, feeling that the sun must be blackened in the sky and a night pitch-dark, without stars, drop all about him. All that sense of paralyzed expectancy which one might have been expected to feel at the vigil on the beach—which some had felt—seemed to descend full upon him, lying here, abandoned to the exaltation of an introspective hope and the terror of an uncertified and unassessable self-knowledge. For he was again alone, and not alone. The thought of Esther Terry

was with him and with such overpowering violence as to make him mentally and bodily helpless. Waves of unmerciful but undefined feeling tossed him about, as if his mind were a millrace. Yet something in him struggled against the mad currents, some doubt, a derelict of reason and ordinary perception, not yet wholly submerged or swept on to limbo.

When he could move he got up stiffly and began to travel along the road. He walked mechanically, not yet able to think. He had gone some distance before he perceived himself to be going—back.

25

All at once the splendor of the day, the downpouring sunshine, the fresh-smelling fields and even the effect of little white clouds floating carelessly in the sky got into his blood. What did anything matter? He was young, alive!

There was no such thing as love in a sense profoundly and psychically transforming. There were only slight physiological changes, excitations, or mere disturbances. . . .

You young animal, Walt!—so the vagabond addresses himself with laughing exuberance—you young animal! Well . . . what could be healthier, more satisfying, than to be a young animal? What could be better than to cultivate the satisfaction and aplomb of animals? What do you know, lad? You know what you feel. . . .

Remember these winters when, with chums, you've gone out on the frozen plain of the Great South Bay with handled, ax and eel-spear? What frosty, warming work to

chop holes in the ice! And in no time the baskets were full of fat, sweet, white-meated fellows. Or perhaps it was summer and you hunted the beach high and low to find the two or three clustered eggs which the sun was to hatch for the sea-gull that laid them. Or you sailed in a boat, looping lazily about Shelter Island, putting in at Fort Pond Bay and tramping gaily to Montauk, there to lie prone on Turtle Hill and watch the ceaseless roll of the Atlantic. The bluefishers and sea-bass takers, the harsh, silent men herding cattle on Montauk, the mute and scornful full-bloods left of the Indian tribe or the loose-lipped half-breeds—these were your company and with them you practised fraternity, learning much with little said. Baymen, farmers, pilots, the charcoal-burners of the mid-Island pine barrens; the bare feet and rolled-up trousers, the clam-digging, hauling down the creek with the boat, loading the hay-boat, chowder-parties on the shore and straw-rides to inland picnics, house-raisings and the housewifely arts of the good-hearted farmers' wives; the smell of pine and the perfume of sedge-meadows. . . . And with all this rich, full stream of existence, you have fancied at moments that life held something else? What nonsense! What more could life hold than health and sleep and fun and a perfect savor?

It was absurd that he should be taking the road back.

He forced himself to stop walking and stood for a few minutes inhaling deeply and deliberately. The utter irrationality of his nature had never so impressed him before. What was he doing? and toward what tending?

“A man ought to reason,” he argued out loud.

Reasoning always started with a question or with an assertion. One ought to be able to ask himself a question, anyhow! Answering it was a separate problem. Or . . . be able to assert something or other.

“Do I love her?” Uttering the words aloud ought to help in vividness, in reality. For curiously the moment was unreal. “Do I love her?”

Too difficult! He tried again, asking impersonally:

“Am I in love?”

There seemed no way of answering that, either. So he inquired:

“Do I know what love is?” To that, yes!

“Have I ever experienced it?”

No. . . . Then it is impossible that I can be in love, or that I love Esther Terry.

Such a triumph of reasoning as that ought to bring complete and instant relief, security, mental ease. He could not say he felt anything of the sort. Reasoning had never seemed so wholly contemptible before. The age of reason! Some time in the last century, hadn't it been?

26

When he arrived back at Babylon it was near to sundown and Walt went to the house where Selah Mulford lived with his mother, a widow, for supper and a bed.

The house was greatly lit. A negro servant opened the door, and Walt asked:

“Are you giving a party, Ebenezer?”

Ebenezer replied that a guest, a lady, was expected by the evening stage from west.

“It is Miss Fuller, Margaret Fuller,” explained Selah Mulford as he led the way to the bedrooms. “Mother knows her. She is on her way from New York to Boston and goes to-morrow by stage to Greenport, thence by the boat. I believe she is to meet Major Jack Downing or Mrs. Sigourney or some other writer at Greenport. You know all these people, I believe; for my part, I can’t tell one from t’other.”

He spoke with a careless glibness and had so much the air of youth in a burning preoccupation of its own that Walt wondered what had come over him since morning. There was no chance to inquire. Sounds from downstairs proved the guest’s arrival and Mrs. Mulford sent Ebenezer to them with a message that dinner was ready.

The four of them were assembled in the parlor-drawing room long enough for an introduction and a few preliminary remarks. Mrs. Mulford, in lavender silk, smiled comfortably at Walt. She was a woman of a placidity so astonishing that one scarcely understood the snowy whiteness of her hair which might have been powdered, seen above her face of complete calm, with not a single noticeable wrinkle. She had been a Schermerhorn from Brooklyn and her mother had been a Van Velsor, of the same family as Walt’s mother, but the relationship was too distant for ciphering out.

Margaret Fuller, the writer and intellectual, one of this new breed of women who seemed to derive from the works of Goethe or to have seeded from the Nature of Jean Jacques Rousseau, presented the greatest possible contrast to her hostess. She was even physically unattractive—

“homely,” Walt admitted to himself, in the everyday expression—but there was a touch of sensuousness about her, visible in the full lips and the mouth’s mobility. The eyes were direct and clear but sparkled only at the perception of some thought, her own or another’s, which struck her as having facets and fires of abstract beauty. She was emotional, too, but her emotions responded, or were allowed to respond, to ideas alone. Above all, she talked briskly, delightfully and with a varying brilliance, as if her mind were proof against physical fatigue.

“Oh,” she was saying to Mrs. Mulford, “we are going to try some sort of experiment, at Concord or elsewhere. If only Emerson will join! I must convert him—impress him with his own responsibility. Men *do* tend to shun responsibility, don’t they, dear Anneke? They are with their ideas as with their offspring; it is enough that they have begotten them—thereafter others must look to the rearing and nurture! I shall tell Emerson quite frankly that he must legitimize his child.”

Mrs. Mulford tried to look shocked but her natural placidity would not let her.

“Bronson Alcott worships Emerson and Emerson has been the soul of kindness to Mr. Alcott but somehow they never quite come into contact with each other. While Alcott talks, Emerson obviously goes on thinking about something else; in fact, he said one day to Alcott: ‘Bronson, when you are talking, Plato becomes a reality instead of remaining just a beautiful dream!’ And it is humiliating to admit it, Anneke, but my own effort to win Emerson’s intimacy has so far failed. I can make him laugh—

indeed, he complained to Mrs. Alcott that I made him laugh too much!—but despite my most artful leadings and pauses the man seemed simply to freeze into silence, utter dumbness, with every opportunity I gave him to speak. There is a good deal that is other-worldly about him.”

“Well, but Emerson’s a poet,” protested Walt.

“That’s only one aspect.” Miss Fuller turned her eyes, with their intellectual gleam, on the young man.

“No! I beg your pardon—the poet includes everything else,” Walt answered. “When you say a man’s a poet you perhaps deprive him of some usual human traits, qualities, endowments; and in the same breath, by the same word, you acknowledge the existence in him of superior traits, superior endowments. It is not a question of penning verses.”

“I see”—she spoke thoughtfully and with the momentary light of intellectual pleasure in her eyes, she had a handsome look. “It is to put the poet in a class with prophets, seers, those whom the ancients considered inspired by the gods.”

“They were inspired by their fellow men.”

“You mean—?”

“They absorbed all and gave it back again, purified; they turned the water into wine.”

“They were inspired by Nature, like Rousseau?” suggested Margaret Fuller.

“Rousseau’s Nature was his own body, his healthy animalism,” Walt declared.

“I don’t believe Emerson is aware he has a body,” was her pensive remark, on this.

“Oh, my dear Margaret, and Mr. Whitman!” Mrs. Mulford murmured. “You young people do discuss such subjects nowadays!”

There was a laugh. Walt noticed that Selah Mulford joined in it tardily. The young man was crumbling a piece of bread. What had happened to him since the morning?

“It’s quite unfathomable how such a mind as Emerson’s works.” Miss Fuller had returned to the disembodied spirit and was considering the processes of intellectual creation. “Apparently he is not able to compose except when rambling in the woods and pastures. He says he does not cast about for thoughts, nor wait for them. They come. In the intervals of their coming, his senses are busy with the weather or the landscape, an anemone or a rhodora, a chipmunk, or the sheen of ice on the Walden pond. Each day he sets down in his journal certain thoughts. Some may have occurred that day, some came first a few days ago but have been perfecting themselves in the recesses of his mind. His writing on any subject is a sifting from his journal entries—matched pearls loosely strung.”

“And he never composes deliberately?” asked Walt, greatly impressed.

“I’m sure he couldn’t,” said Margaret Fuller, with decision. “He is incapable of conscious effort or conscious concentration and that is where he differs from everybody else I have ever heard of or read about. His sermons are made (you can’t say ‘written’) in the same fashion. But his voice! Warm, rich, wonderful! And his manner, his

very presence, has something serenely shining about it."

Walt thrilled. Selah Mulford quoted suddenly a line, the last, of the *Paradiso*—to-night he felt himself very much a descendant of the Marchesi Brignole. Miss Fuller, evidently at home in Italian, gave an exclamation of dismay at the sound of the words.

"There!" she said as she and Mrs. Mulford left the room, "what a reminder of the great man's limitations! Emerson is unable to see anything whatsoever in Dante, he says, that he cannot find also in Zerah Colburn! . . . But yet a poet, Mr. Whitman!" She paused in the doorway. "Don't be too long apart from us. I like your talk."

27

Selah Mulford faced Walt, and told him:

"I am going to marry Sarah Purrier. I asked to-day, and she—consented."

" . . . Your mother? "

"Will never know. Nor will any one else. We shall be wed at once. If, some months from now . . . who will find anything to say; tell me? Simply, there will be another . . . Mulford. My mother took my announcement with a good grace."

The boy had slumped down in his chair at the table; his chin rested on his breast. With a movement Walt flung himself on the arm of the chair, one hand encircling Selah's neck. Beneath the palm of that hand he could feel an artery throbbing. He said at length:

"You and she talked freely? "

“Walt, there can be nothing we did not tell each other! It was a sort of nakedness, without shame, and we both knew and said that neither of us ever had known anything like it. I think the holy of holies must exist somewhere in the mind, and but one person is admitted to it in the longest lifetime. *That* has nothing to do with—the other thing, or any other thing! I do not believe it has anything to do with marriage,” concluded Selah Mulford, invincibly.

“But you contemplate marriage,” Walt said, as if objecting. “You two have had this—I think ‘communion’ is the one word, don’t you?—and the freshness and the wonder of that will last, as it seems to you, well, forever! Marriage has no bearing; your own words! Consider and tell me: What is it you do? You make a sacrifice, don’t you? for her sake—and it cannot be completely successful. You put her in your debt with an act she can never repay (how can she repay; what can be a true equivalent?). Oh, I greatly fear you will both of you live to regret it!”

Selah Mulford twisted his head about and looked upward into Walt’s face. His first fierce intention was softened by what he saw there and when he spoke it was to say, quite gently:

“Man, you don’t understand. We love each other.”

“Are you sure of that? And how? Do you know how most folk would analyze this? They would say it was an extreme oscillation—swoop of the pendulum in the opposite direction—a rebound from your experience with Temperance Wines. . . . Ah, you may look at me as hardly as

you like, Selah. Maybe I'm the Tempter himself. But you can't get rid of the Devil by consigning him to hell; he lives there."

A strong bitterness flavored Walt's concluding words; he seemed to himself to be tasting gall. Again that fleeting sense of personal guilt assailed him, the precise feeling that had overtaken him on hearing Joel Skidmore's ecstatic confession. He put it aside, with an effort, and a kind of dizziness took its place; the inner lives and emotional experiences of Joel and Selah and Sarah Purrier and Herman Melville confused themselves with his own emotions that day and with the persistently returning vision of Esther Terry. Stronger than all this turmoil was a knife-like pang of sharpest envy; he recalled with vain contrition Melville's words about envy; he fought against the admission, even to himself, that in thinking of Joel and listening to Selah he, Walt Whitman, was envying a form of success—the greatest, the most incontestable, the one (to him) as yet unknown.

And as if his exalted happiness had conferred on him some special insight Selah Mulford, studying the face of Walt, futile in the assumed rôle of Tempter, was observing good-humoredly:

"You know you haven't told me what brought you back to-night. What on earth did, anyway? Why aren't you a day's journey Montaukward?"

Walt murmured: "Oh, didn't I tell you? Well, I—I changed my mind. Besides, there's twenty dollars waiting for me at Freegift Terry's." The reference to her

father's home affected him as though he had made a slip of the tongue. "Come, we must join Miss Fuller and your mother," he finished hurriedly.

"Yes, certainly." But Selah Mulford continued to stare at his comrade with a look of speculative surprise.

"What have you men been talking about?" Margaret Fuller demanded. "Do you know, Anneke," turning to Mrs. Mulford, "I love better than almost anything hearing men talk among themselves. I always hate leaving them after dinner and I always long to hide behind curtains and eavesdrop."

Mrs. Mulford made another effort to appear scandalized but the pleasant gravure of her face succeeded only in altering to a vague and momentary vacancy, as if she had mislaid an emotion without which she would not appear quite ladylike.

Selah laughed, a little too unforcedly.

"We have been discussing love."

"Oh, how indelicate you are, Selah." But his mother spoke contentedly.

"You don't *sound* shocked," he answered good-humoredly. Mrs. Mulford sighed. If she could neither look shocked nor sound shocked, well, she had done her best for the conventionalities.

"I think I am disappointed," declared Margaret Fuller, with an effect of consideration. "Women talk so much about love. I had hoped for some masculine topic. Like abolition."

"The peculiar thing about abolition as a topic of talk,"

Walt told her, drawlingly, "is: It abolishes friendships, decency in debate, and everything, in fact, except human slavery."

"That is witty. You must tell me how you stand—you are extreme anti-slavery? yes—and then we can talk of something else. You might tell me what you were saying about—love. Was it all in the magnificent vein of Selah's line from Dante?" And she quoted again:

"L'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle . . ."

"Was it the love which swings the sun and stars?"

"How that phrase frees the spirit!" The clear beam from Walt's eyes made a completer answer than his comment. Miss Fuller shook her head; said with an intellectual pounce:

"Ah, Mr. Whitman! You talk of a phrase freeing the spirit? What are phrases? We who use them know how to despise them, I fancy."

Walt gazed at her serenely.

"You despise too much, ma'm," he told her. "Take care! 'Tis a habit grows on one fast. And no one can afford to feel contempt, not ever, I guess."

One saw the feminine intellect accoutring itself. "Why, bless the man! what a gospel. Perhaps 'despise' is not the word; but surely you'll allow all civilization, all progress to consist in more or less continuous discriminations; we are always rejecting something or other in favor of something else."

"I feel it is wrong," he withstood her.

"You would be totally unsophisticated?"

"No, I would be perfectly sophisticated. Perfect sophistication accepts everything. Those who are always rejecting, ignoring, passing by and discarding are those who have not fully—how put it? have not fully—*arrived*. They lack the last poise, their position, mentally, intellectually and emotionally is still precarious and they know it. So they balance themselves with dizzy shrugs and tread the tightrope of disdain—disdain of this or that thing which is humble and lowly and human. They are snobs? But to call them that is to take our place, for the moment at least, with them. They are imperfectly sophisticated. . . . Perfect sophistication is of no use except to enable us to recapture the freshness, the simplicity, the beauty of the world. Can you separate its beauty from a rose? No. The real beauty of the world is equally inseparable from the total world—a world which contains both roses and skunk cabbages. You cannot pick the rose alone and say: 'Here is the beauty of the world.' You must enlarge your notion, concept, of beauty to include the skunk cabbage also."

"But it is a young genius!" exclaimed Margaret Fuller, half-aloud and as if she were phrasing the comment in German. "*Es ist ja die Weltanschauung.*" And she began to urge Walt to visit Boston and Concord, meet Emerson "and all the others," exchange ideas. To such suggestions and to her urgings he shook his head.

"Why not?"

"You have your disdain for phrases; I have my distrust of ideas," he said, smiling. "Oh, I am not perfectly so-

phisticated, any more than the rest. There are still plenty of ideas—some seem my own but probably are not, some come from others—of which I am badly scared.”

“Tell me a few.”

He gave a great laugh. “No-no! You will have them all out of me, soon enough, anyway. It is not women who are unable to defend themselves against men, but the men who are defenseless before the women—or soon will be! Between the sexes there will always be a servile insurrection going on.”

“*Dux femina facti*. But we mean to have our rights.” She spoke spiritedly, with a lift of her head; not a phrase but a mere word, with its assertion of a principle involved, had kindled her glance; but the faint flush and the red fullness of the mouth held his attention. He wondered greatly about her and about all women; how much they would take (wouldn't it be all, and more ever-demanded? weren't they, at the last, insatiable?). And he wondered how much she (and they) could tell. . . .

Selah's mother having directed at him a familiar look of interrogation, he had risen and accompanied her into the room used as a library. Coals threw heat and a mild light from the grate; the son placed candles and he and his mother sat down to a game of chess. Anneke Mulford was a poor chess-player but the leisureliness of the game afforded her, while she waited for her son's deliberated moves, those reflective intervals, not too long, which many wives and many mothers covet toward the end of a day.

Her own moves were made without much premeditation, as a rule; she preferred to have Selah win on the board if only she succeeded in avoiding a checkmate among her own musings.

She was careful not to speak until he lifted his hand from a knight and it was her turn.

"I think I ought to tell you, Selah; it may hurt you now, but will perhaps be easier for you later. I know."

And her "know" had a gentle intonation which made him look up quickly, inquiring, with a faint uneasiness:

"You—know? Know what, mother?"

Her reply was perfect. "Son, I mean I know what you didn't tell me to-day."

His look was strange, but she understood it. The lace on her sleeve capsized a rook and a pawn as she reached and took his hand in her fingers, holding it lightly and for just a moment, with a little pressure that was like a farewell. She held his eyes with her own.

"It is all right, son. I—Sarah will make a fine woman and a good wife." She smiled. "The two things are not the same, though I suppose most young men think so."

He could not reply to her. The sense of estrangement from her which had so curiously been upon him from that morning had changed, at the admission from her lips, to a sudden feeling of hate. It was horrible to face the fact that in that instant he had hated his own mother. He had thought to himself, almost immediately: I must be utterly unstrung, and not well nor myself any longer. . . . What was incomprehensible was that, meeting his mother's gaze, he saw she understood this phase, too.

But he could not talk to her about it. Simply, he could not. Somehow, between them, the game was left unfinished, and they sat in a silence looking at the dropping coals. At length she felt her hand caught, lifted with a reluctant wistfulness, and held for a second against his hot lips. . . .

29

That was all the son could manage toward his mother (and who knows? perhaps it was enough and more than enough) but to Selah alone with Walt in one of the large bedrooms there came the gift of words, facile if none too coherent.

“Walt, I am a changed man! I—do you know, this evening, I’ve wondered if I may not be going out of my mind! The beauty of it! and something hurting, hurting, deep down, shaking me all over. My mother . . . you know how close we’ve always been to each other and now I’ve—sort of—lost her and yet I’m glad of it! It makes it worse because I can see she understands it and I don’t; I feel . . . moments . . . toward Sarah as a boy, a young boy at his best feels toward his mother. That’s the ideal side, or one ideal side of my feeling. The rest is . . . just a surge of passion, I guess. God help me! It makes you feel so weak; makes you have moments when you want to cry, only you can’t cry . . . you’re just nothing but a little child again. Walt, I didn’t know a man could suffer so!”

The knuckles of his clenched fists were white. He turned on Walt:

“Man! Haven’t you anything to say to me?”

"What should I have to say to you?" Walt's voice was toneless.

"Aren't you—aren't you *glad*? Come, tell me you didn't mean all you were saying to me at the dinner table!"

"Oh . . . that! How could I mean anything? I don't know anything about it, do I?" A sudden contorting spasm struck across his face and Selah Mulford saw the blue-gray eyes glisten. "Don't listen to me, Selah! *I've* never been in love; likely I never shall be."

As if his own transfigured existence had given him an extension of some perceptive faculty, Sarah Purrier's lover cried suddenly:

"You *are* in love. That's what brought you back." All at once he stiffened. "Wait! You—she isn't Sarah, is she, Walt? You didn't come back for . . ."

"It isn't any one!" Walt flung back. "That is, I—I had remembered some one but the whole idea is preposterous, silly, and I must put it out of mind. The—the best way to do that seems to be to go back and look at her and convince myself that it's only a delusion."

"It isn't. I don't believe it ever is."

"Well, I—"

"Look here." Selah rapidly matured his new self-knowledge and offered it as wisdom. "First off, I guess, you've got to be in love with *love*. My belief is: It's something like my violin; you have first to be attuned for it. Otherwise no music's possible. And even then there's plenty of chance for mistakes. Discords. Hang it! That comparison's no good, either." He thought a disconsolate moment and then resumed:

“The violin’s only one thing, the bow that plays upon it, that’s the other. Temperance—Temperance Wines—was the wrong bow. And *that* doesn’t give my meaning. What I want to know is, Walt: Where does it really begin? Who begins it? And shucks! I don’t care about that—how can I?—since it all has happened. I’m just *in* it, immersed.” He lay back on the bed, still half-clothed, his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes watching the wavering shadows thrown by the flickering candlelight upon the low ceiling.

“Walt, when you love everything is terrible and delicious! You feel all soft, no better than jelly, but you don’t care and you know you could resist, force through, anything! And all the time your mind is filled with lovely images and lights and dancing shadows; you watch the fire in the fireplace and the flames are singing; you think of all the beautiful places you have ever seen—you mind, don’t you? the great width of the Main Street in Easthampton, where all my father’s family came from these two hundred years past, that wide, wide street with immense, friendly elms and the old burying ground on the side hill and the serene old church? Yes, I think of Easthampton and the big elm trees I used to play under when I was a shaver and all the plain brown stones where my people lie in rows for their rest along the pleasant street they made and walked upon. I think, too, of that seafaring great-parent of mine who visited all the harbors of the world and amassed money but, best of all, sated his own lifelong curiosity. I think of the noblewoman he took for his bride, a young girl of an-

other race and a proud family—you know, really, there was no more fiercely aristocratic strain in all the sweep from Rome to the Alps than the Marquises Brignole. I think of her and my ancestor who took her to wife particularly; it must have seemed to both of them so vast a hazard of their fortunes, of their respective happiness. No doubt they were lifted to the skies, but were they also desperately frightened, too, I wonder? Yes, I wonder; but I do not really care. In every life, even the humblest, I suppose, there must come one supreme hour in which all one's future is clutched, crumpled, in his fingers and flung down recklessly—like the last banknotes on the roulette table. And it is not as if there were anything to be won! What can be won that is finer than the superb risk of that moment? There are many ways of challenging fate by the final pledge, the stake of one's happiness. But what can compare with this way? ”

“ You could so easily be misunderstood,” Walt said, as if musing aloud. “ And yet, I do not misunderstand you. You use the language of the magnificent gambler but that is only your imagination playing about the heart of it all, as the colored flames play about a salt-soaked piece of drift-wood. The oak plank burns; gives forth a steady heat. I suppose the pitch of passion has to be reached. . . . But it ought not to burn out in a bonfire. It ought to light a beacon. That's it: Beacon or bonfire? You know,” turning to Selah, “ when I ask that I don't think of you. You know the fellow I am thinking of.” He gave a little jerk of his arm toward himself. “ The flame has to be fed, has to

be tended, trimmed, kept steady. I—can't, can't tell. I . . . pray Heaven I may find out when again I see her. Soon, oh, soon! ”

30

Selah bade him good-night and left him, and Walt snuffed out his candle, trying for sleep. There was none and he fell to thinking of what Margaret Fuller had said that evening after Selah and his mother were at their chess. He had said, reverting to the topic of love, that he supposed women speculated about it, theorized, much more than men. To which she had instantly answered:

“ Women don't theorize about love; no. They consider actual cases.”

“ Is the sex so practical? ”

“ It is we who are practical, Mr. Whitman, and you men who walk with your heads in the clouds.”

“ And you don't analyze your feelings? ”

“ Oh, never!—I am talking about my sex, not myself. We are too busy *feeling* to do anything of the sort. And we never go back afterward to dissect. You may have read Wordsworth's definition of poetry as emotion recollected in tranquillity. Under that definition, no woman could ever qualify as a poet. Women do not recollect emotions any more than the bridge recollects the water that has flowed under it. Women may re-live certain moments—just as the same water, turned about, can be made to flow back under the bridge. But that is not recollection and it is not tranquil.”

The inflection of her voice, in pronouncing that last sen-

tence, was undisturbed; had it any significance personal to her? Walt had asked himself. He thought not, but he had ventured saying:

“You differentiate yourself from your sex as a whole in all this?”

“I *am* different,” she admitted. “I suppose, one of these days, I shall find myself less different than I now imagine.” Then it was all ahead of her, he deduced, not bothering to define “it.” She was going on:

“The important thing is to recognize a difference—exaggeration of it effects its own cure. What women need is, on the intellectual side, to strive to be more like men. In doing so they will run no real risk of becoming less the woman. Except in isolated cases. It is something like plants. You have heard of the methods of these skilled gardeners, these horticulturists? They cross-fertilize. We don’t understand it yet, quite; but we get new varieties. Sex always remains.”

“You would have women become, in ways of thought, more nearly like men, or try hard to; but how about men? Wouldn’t it be equally good if men, on the emotional side, could become more like women, or try for it?”

“Why, yes”—thoughtfully—“for that would mean a more humane world. It is feeling, not our reason, that oils our lives. A man can have the quick, sensitive feeling of a woman without the sacrifice of manhood—courage or strength. All the great poets, or artists of any sort, have this feminine niceness, sensitiveness.”

“And all your women who succeed in acquiring something of the male mind—what will they become?”

“Don’t forget we have always had one such, now and again.”

“But when? Who?”

“How about England’s Queen Elizabeth?”

“You don’t mean her good male swearing?”

“I mean her statecraft, her bold imagination, her courage.”

“Another?”

“Joan of Arc?”

“I don’t know as I can confute you.”

“But observe this,” she directed him. “The immortal great do not find their sublime fulfilment in sex. The *Virgin* Queen, the *Maid* of Orleans—oh, I know, often they marry, but it is marriage so frequently drained of something; they do not bring their best to marriage, but their second best. It has to be.”

“Would you go so far as to say that a man who loves to the deepest depth and to the highest height of his being might know by that, and know then, that he was not marked for ultimate greatness—I mean in the future reckoning of his fellows?”

“Not just that. He is ready with the gift of his Self, in its finest flower; but the gift may be denied; his love may suffer a disappointment. This precious gift may be left in his hands, and if that experience does not kill something in it he may yet give the gift, in another shape, to the world at large.”

Walt had had a sense of tremendous destiny quivering in the balance . . . his own and yet not his own. Had this been simple, naïve conceit? Was it mere swollen ego in

himself? He could not tell. There must be times when every man, to himself, played Napoleon, or Alexander, or Shakespeare, or saw himself seated among the Olympians, or heard his own inner voice, enthralled, as if a god spoke. . . .

Every man had one supreme gift to offer, once, or perhaps after frustration a second time, the gift of his Self in finest, fullest flower. He made the gift to the many or to the one. And perhaps it was rejected by the one and accepted by the many, or perhaps it was not enough for the many but overflowed for the one. Which? And how did one know? And how far was the gift voluntary? And when was it proffered?

To these questions there seemed, more acutely than ever, no answer.

As he lay there, very wakeful in the darkness, the fresh air of the May night entering through an opened window, he thought with a faint bitterness of his own vision of himself as the Answerer, one who should feel all, understand all, and to all, however small the offering, bring some desired gift. An Answerer? He who was on the knife-blade of torment and could not shrink away from it? He, then, was to save others, somehow, who could not save himself—*he?*

31

In the night he dreamed, a thing he never did. He was somewhere in a neutral, misty region and at a little distance there sat a creature enthroned; he knew she was a woman, but who he could not tell, and her face was hidden, turned

away from him. As he regarded her speechlessly, for how long a time he could not have told, slowly her head turned toward him and her face shone upon him.

The effect was instant and terrible. He flung himself on the ground at her feet, with shaking hands caught the hem of her robe and drew it to his twisting lips. He did this conscious only of an irresistible and overwhelming impulsion from within, as if the pure and beneficent light of an immortal countenance had struck into his soul and set it free in a realm of ether lit by a single glance. . . . He saw her face as one sees the sun and could not bear to look upon it. He could only know that she shone upon him kindly. He could only know, sense somehow, that this was a Woman. . . .

Waking, he found himself sobbing weakly, without tears. It was a long while before he could regain any control of himself as he lay there. And he tried desperately to understand. He had not truly seen that Face; there could be no such thing as recognition were he to look again upon it. He would know it in one way only, by its effect upon him. There were not words to describe the awe, the terror, the ecstasy and the surrender of that moment . . . there were not words . . . and it might be that there was not the emotion. . . .

Was this a dreamlike apotheosis of love? for his thought shrank from the suggestion that the Face was one of any mortal woman, though it might be a composite of many mortal faces and sum up in the radiance of its look all those mortal attributes that were incorruptible, beyond-earthly

and sublime. He thought of old Greek legends, of the Medusa who symbolized the starlit night, of the Furies with snaky locks denoting the searching light of day from which nothing was hidden, of lovely Iole, personification of the violet-colored clouds which loved to swim above the Ionian isles. All these glorious conceptions faded into dimness beside the racking reality of what had been merely his dream.

Because it did not fade nor dim on waking, the image took on for him an impressive nature, became both a portent and an eidolon. It stood outside himself but it came from within himself. It was a Body within his body, the real I-myself, the whole purport of the fleshed being called Walt Whitman. He had asked for answers, and his Self had given this . . . Answer.

32

From that stark conclusion he could not escape and it rested, recessed but present, in his consciousness (he secretly knew he should never evict it and it would go on with its silent attendance upon everything he did). What the image meant, what the eidolon portrayed, would become clear. This Woman who left him sobbing tearlessly was something that entered into and was a fixed part of the true Walt Whitman. That kneeling figure, weak and overcome, was also a fixed part of the true Walt Whitman. A circle that had to be pondered, and, duly pondered, would remain a circle . . . or a spiral? opening out, opening out, in ever-enlarging arcs and whorls into eternity? . . . and closing in, with sinuous, curved perfection into a dot, into a mathe-

matal point without thickness or breadth or any dimension whatever? and the curve was Walt Whitman and curved both ways.

Long, deep breaths, effortlessly exhaled. He slept.

33

By a different road than the one he had struck in quitting it, Walt reëntered the valley the next morning. It was a day of mist which fumed out of hollows as if a dozen incantations were progressing at once; of sunshine which laid spears of gold-washed light on the wooded hillsides and, interpenetrating the rising mist, made the luminous and textured atmosphere essential for miracles. Fifth Month! May.

The age of miracles is not past, thought Walt, and I might be living in those middle centuries when, on such a day, there set forth afoot or on horseback young men like myself, going to join the Crusade and carolling as they went. He recalled the words of the old *Crusaders' Hymn*:

“Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nature,
O, Thou of God and man the Son!
Thee will I cherish,
Thee will I honor,
Thou, my heart's glory, joy and crown.

“Fair are the meadows,
Fairer still the woodlands
Robed in the blooming garb of spring.
Jesus is fairer,
Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing. . . .”

A naïve joy must have filled their breasts and innocently they had confounded a pagan pleasure in the beauty of the

hour and season with the profounder and less-understood exaltation of their holy errand. . . . Holy because innocently entered upon. Holy because their hearts were enlisted.

This, the heart, unquestioning, valorous and unafraid, was the true holiness of any undertaking, and alone sanctified it by the pure emotion poured out unstintingly by humble men. It was what men brought to a quest that made the quest holy. Not even the long, legendary hunt for the Grail had possessed significance except as men endowed it with the deepest significance. . . . There was a lesson here.

How dear, familiar and welcoming looked the roomy farmhouse! It stood behind a row of whitewashed palings and the tall lilac bush in the dooryard was rich with blossoms, great purple clusters and, around by the kitchen door, another bush was just bursting into white. The scent of the lilacs filled the air as he came up to the fence; their strong perfume mastered his senses so that he felt giddy and reached out a hand to grasp a paling. He stood so for some minutes.

A thump on the shoulder and a young arm flung about his neck woke him; he looked up into the face of young Freegift Terry; boy confronted boy and tried to bundle the other in his arms; they hugged, thrust apart, hugged again; then stood with glad, meeting eyes. Those of the youngest son of Farmer Freegift Terry were brown, lustrous and appealingly affectionate. The contours of his face had a thinness, an unaccentuation of especial charm, the charm of something not quite finished. He had none of Walt's achieved growth and perfect bodily symmetry; was slim-

mer, definitely masculine but indefinitely immature. That there was but two years difference in their ages was incredible; more incredible was it, as Walt had once declared, that they were the same animal; and he had added: "Are we? Maybe not. You are not a faun, I suppose, and I am not a centaur; yet we are as far apart to the eye as a faun and a centaur."

"Hello, young critter!"

"Where away and why, old critter?"

"Freegift, I made a sort of mistake. I should 'a' taken you with me; then we'd 'a' got somewhere. I . . . I jest been over and roundabout Babylon."

"Father's holding your wage."

"Oh, that . . . yes. Where's all the rest, 'sides yourself?"

"We're all here, scattered about as the work takes us."

"What'll I do for my keep?"

"We're clearing some more ground, besides the planting."

"I suppose your mother's well, and Esther?"

"Esther's got a beau. David Sayre."

"That Smithtown fellow?"

"Yes . . . why, what about him?"

The look on Walt's face dissolved. "Nothing about *him*," he said, simply. "I was only wondering about—Esther."

"She's all right," replied her brother, carelessly. "I've got to go out in the field. See you at dinner."

Walt stood a while longer by the palings. He was recalling David Sayre, a bashful young farmer with a shock of reddish hair and a mild, freckled countenance. It was no

wonder he came after Esther but to her he must seem, though pleasant and kind, both unattractive and dull. He would be like having mashed turnips every day for dinner.

Walt made this reflection almost grimly. He turned the house and there Esther stood.

A remembered vision struck alive, made a reality. She faced him, with a look of surprise changing to delight. Sol—just as he had recollected, the sun made her blue eyes, flecked with golden-brown, appear to dance (though veiledly). The saddle-colored hair, put up in coils, was not in the least lustrous but drank in the sunlight and intensified the warmth of its brown. The bare forearm, the little roundedness of her shoulders . . .

He supposed they greeted each other and a remark or two must presumably have been interchanged; at the instant and afterward he could be sure of absolutely nothing except the swift destruction of all his preconceptions, theories and self-willed ideas. She affected his senses as had the fragrant lilacs. She was an embodiment of the deliciousness of the air and the sunshine and the innocently gay Fifth Month morning. She made him feel like a clod, a prig and a fool; and in the inconceivably rapid pulsations that her presence set up within him he oscillated between a feeling unfathomably tender and a stony insensitiveness that was not so much hate as a wish for her obliteration, a wish she had never been born.

. . . Afterward, reliving those hours after Walt's return from wayfaring, Esther Terry did not see how she could

have behaved otherwise. And this was absolutely the only comment in which her woman's mind indulged. For she was a woman. Many girls of her own seventeen years were already married and remained, essentially, girls still. She in her singleness was conscious of her distinct superiority to them; she was older in perceptiveness; she was wiser because she shared their intimacies and their combined experience and, through them, led several lives vicariously her own.

Being a woman she did not analyze what she knew; she was not interested in any effort to reach general conclusions; and she knew well that, like all her sex, if she were misled it would not be in the manner in which men were invariably misled, by some glittering proverb or piece of compressed and so-called wisdom, but by a hesitation in which the clear guidance of her instinct would be lost.

She said to herself that she didn't see how she could have acted otherwise. Then mentally she crossed out the word "acted" and substituted for it the word "behaved." That was better, for her part throughout had been passive; had been exclusively a matter of behavior, of outwardness and attitude underlain by the invincible operation of her instinct which, thank gracious goodness, had never in all those hours, interspersed through several days of a week in May, become numbed. What might have happened to it if she had not already come to think of David Sayre "in that way," she didn't know—or think about—or care, since she *had*.

The moment Walt surprised her, coming around the house, she had read in his glance the why of his return. The fact

that he had been certain to come back to the farm, that his re-appearance might be looked for any day, was just as well since it was "why" enough for the men—her father and her brothers. All men wanted was a reason and they were perfectly satisfied. That was what had always made relations with Walt—the casual contacts in her home while he was "boarding out" with them—a special problem. He was unique; appearances never satisfied him; a man's sufficient reason was not always his motive; he so often sensed things which were otherwise the little, harmless secrets of her mother and herself from the men-folks. Many and many a time she and he had looked across the table at each other, their eyes exchanging trifling intelligence with or without an accompanying smile. As when she had suddenly decided that the gown with three flowered ruffles was unbecoming. She had just remarked to Mrs. Terry (of course, with a look) that it seemed to have faded and plainly wasn't going to wear well. The "men" had complained of her non-appearance in it any longer; whereupon she and Mother had told them about its fading. . . . After a little grumbling they had subsided, forgetting all about the dress forever; but Walt had just looked at her and said, easily:

"It's a fact a dress like that will fade overnight, almost."

You see! He was helping her out (for he spoke with calm seriousness, handing out to the men one of those "facts" they insisted on having dished up, like boiled hominy which must always "go with" the pork). And at the same time, his eyes told her he was both poking fun and approving—above all, he *knew*.

And in his knowledge, he was nearly always sympathetic and unfailingly loyal to her secrets, or her mother's. That made him fun, with a constant little edge of excitement. In his rôle as a sort of bystander. Esther had never thought of him, then, in any other rôle. For some time. Then, because he was a man, and because it was her feminine prerogative to re-arrange the cast of her acquaintances and put every one of the opposite sex in different rôles, except those whose parts were fixed by the ties of close relationship, she had mentally cast Walt for the leading part in the drama in which she was playing and would continue to play *Esther Terry*, a drama which, if not exactly Shakespearian, was delightfully her own.

Walt as hero had not suited the requirements of her imagined play. He knew too much. He was admirable as the friend of the heroine. He would, of course, be the friend of the heroine's husband-lover. But his true allegiance would be to the heroine herself; he would never give her away to her husband. Women need such a friend (Esther was thinking of what she had observed and what she had heard from the girls she knew who were not long married). Women need such a friend but such a friend is rarely vouchsafed them outside their own sex. And the near friend, if a woman, cannot help so much. Let us see: She can console, advise, and help weave the harmless plots by which the married woman effectuates her happiness—and his, if only he knew it! But that is all. The near friend, if a woman, can do nothing directly or indirectly with *him*; if he so much as suspects any special intimacy between her and his wife he will hate her with a jealous hate, particularly in the first

years of marriage. It is a part of his darling stupidity; he is made that way; he cannot help himself.

The near friend, if a man, has a rôle so difficult that you never cast any one in it unless he assumes it himself. It wouldn't be fair to . . . like making an actor play *Hamlet* and then asserting he was no actor though he was admirable in dozens of other parts. But if a man assumes the rôle of the near friend, if he never communicates directly but only senses things unflinching, and if he then, when the occasion demands it, proceeds independently; if, without seeming to, he now and again *steers* the husband just the littlest bit as a man can steer another . . . if, if, *if!* . . . he can be *wonderful!* Such a performance, solely for an audience of one, is priceless. It is like a world-artist appearing exclusively before a queen in a drama on which the happiness and even the lives of both are depending. . . . The audience and the play are invisibly one.

Such, not bothered to be put into words, had been Esther Terry's complete understanding. She was seventeen and she was seventy. Born and brought up on a farm, a drama was, to her, the expression of actual lives, like those she saw being lived around her, in terms of the printed Shakespeare which was her only knowledge of a play. She had never seen an acted play, nor been inside a playhouse; when she read Shakespeare, therefore, she had no feeling of artifice except in the language—and that (no doubt) was mostly because it belonged to earlier centuries. For her Shakespeare had no suggestion of scenery, stage costumes, antique clothing, trappings or conventions; Othello was not a swarthy, ranting Moor but a jealous husband; Portia was a

woman besting a man with man's own weapons; Juliet and her lover were any young pair thwarted by their elders, as young Richard Reeve and Mary Homan had been thwarted. Life was Shakespeare with variations.

It was Walt who had intensified her enjoyment of those classical plays by the manner of his reading aloud. He had not assumed that because she was seventeen and a girl, she couldn't get their full meaning. Instead, he had let her know that he understood them as well as she. That had been her first insight into his possibilities. They were not possibilities as a husband. With such a husband there would be no drama. The successful heroine, the truly happy wife, was one whose husband discovered and re-discovered her fitness in her rôle. But Walt knew all about such a thing from the start; he would have to pretend . . . worse, her innocent pretending would be spoiled by his seeing through everything. People who see through cannot "play against" each other.

All this *understood*, or felt; not exactly thought; let it be impressed: Not bothered to be put into words (quite unwordable, anyway).

This settled, the re-casting of characters could go on; it was all so tentative and agreeable and, as yet, comfortingly inconclusive. Men drill, themselves or each other; but women rehearse. Neither the absolutely satisfactory hat or husband exists. Seventeen-year-old Esther Terry had not acquired this valuable piece of knowledge in her seventeen years; she had been born with it. With the innocence that was also a birthright she had imagined every eligible man as her leading man, David Sayre among others, and he had

been as satisfactory as any. Indeed, it was in his favor that he had been among the first her imagination had tried; for this made more likely her ultimate mental return to him. Before that had come about, his mild, freckled face had begun to appear with an observable regularity at the Terry farm. He had sat with them, evenings, in the parlor. He had excelled himself in bashfulness in her presence. He had not spoken and Esther considered it improbable that—well, exactly—he ever would. But this was what she wanted; hers was the bigger part to play, wasn't it?

Then, interrupting the nicely-going scene, Walt.

In his look as he stood before her, in his voice full of nervous excitement, she grasped the meaning and the purpose of the interruption. For just a moment it threw her into complete confusion; she felt she must be blushing and her knees had a curious tendency to give way under her. But, she saw immediately, he was far too disturbed to notice anything. What had profoundly astonished her, however, was the revelation that afternoon, when they managed a half-hour together, of the change effected in him. She ran through what they had said to each other, adding the interpretations her mind had placed upon it at the time.

Of course the real starting-point was when he had said:

“Esther, I came back because I've discovered I love you.”

“Walt, I couldn't ever marry you”—under her wistfulness she was invaded by an unexpected pang at the thought she couldn't. It was purely a woman's regret at having to put aside something that wouldn't just do but yet was fascinating. He *was* fascinating.

She felt that more strongly than ever in the short silence which was terminated by his saying:

“I can’t believe you are in love with Davy Sayre.”

Said not a bit scornfully, but with a note of bewilderment she never remembered to have heard before in his voice. That elusive accent had been her first glimpse of how changed he was.

“I can’t believe *you* are in love with *me*.”

“Oh, but I am!” he had exclaimed with extraordinary tenderness. “I’m not self-deceived now. And I’m not so good-and-stupid in the man-fashion as to think that, if I were, it wouldn’t be plain to you. The thought of love came first, the thought of you afterward; but one led surely to the other. And then I began to suffer. . . . I suffered until I saw you this morning. I can’t tell you what I felt at that moment. I had pictured what it would be; then the very blood in my veins became etcher’s acid. Don’t you see what you have done to me? don’t you?”

She saw, this time with a thrill of fright, that something corrosive had been at work, and was. And he was sincere in thinking it was herself, or the vision of herself. But—how could it be so? They had been apart. And any thought of him had been without effect of that sort on her.

“I can see you have changed, somehow.”

“How?”

“You have met some one, or heard something, that has worked upon you. You thought of love, then you thought of me; that was the wrong way about. If the thought of me had deepened and broadened . . . I don’t believe I can explain what I mean; but it is this: If ever I were to love a

man"—and she *had* been thinking of David Sayre; not wilfully; he had just bashfully intruded himself—"I would have the thought of him first and the thought of love, of my loving him, afterward."

He had protested it couldn't make any difference (and this had been a further clue to what the change was that had come over him).

"I've *arrived* . . . that's all that matters! Wait! Let me tell you what it means. . . ."

Then had come his wonderful description—wonderful even if he mistook meanings. Poor boy! he couldn't *see* aright; it wasn't his fault.

"I suppose I am unlucky. I know, in ways, I am different from most young fellows. And to be different is unlucky. But it need not last. It can be overcome—while you're young, flexible, strong. Don't we bend trees to make a hedgerow along the boundary ditch? And we yoke young people and mostly they team well. I thought it over—much. And I saw something of what it meant. I mean not only love but marriage where love is. There needed to be passion. The thought of her, or of him, mustn't leave you physically unmoved. But more than that was needed. A great faith in life itself was needed. That would last. That would last because it was the true passion, the larger love. It would be so big you could never pass beyond it; a Life immense, buoyant, enclosing and outreaching the very stars! And more real than this world about us, because self-created. . . . Don't you see, Esther? A man is a new Adam in a universe of his own fashioning and at last he

fashions a woman, really from himself, to share with him all its loveliness and beauty and grandeur. . . .”

After a little she had said:

“That is just *it*, Walt. It isn't I you love, but what you make of me, build around me. Something, as you say, fashioned 'really from yourself.' I am Eve, just an after-thought. You created this New World without me. Oh, Walt! you will never persuade any girl that way! She must come first!”

She hadn't been able to help that vexed exclamation, though out of a real pity for him she had kept back the rest. She had wanted to cry out: You *are* changed, and at last I understand how. Something has destroyed your special gift, or numbed it. Now you are just as unseeing as any other man. They say love is blind. It has blinded you. Why, a month ago you would have read me at once, would have *known* everything about Davy and myself; I couldn't have kept a *bit* of it from you and if you had chosen to break it up . . . to interfere . . . you might have succeeded . . . I don't know! But then, you wouldn't have been in love with me yourself and you wouldn't have wanted to interfere. Now, when you do want to interfere, your clear sight is gone and you just grope about with eager fingers. . . . I *do* feel sorry for you! but I don't love you and I never shall. I shall love Davy. I . . .

And with shut eyes she had endured the kisses on face and throat, the quiver of the firm hand grasping her shoulder; a feeling delicious and sad had flooded her and all

the time, behind dropped eyelids, she had been imaging the face so close to her own as Davy's. . . . It had made her ache with joy to think of the time when Davy would discover that she wanted . . . this . . . of him, and would give it her. What made Davy so dear was the realization that she could give him unimagined ecstasy, ecstasy he didn't know existed.

"No! No!" she had found herself answering to Walt's whispers. "I—don't—love you, Walt. I"—she had weakened, or relented, sufficiently to add—"believe you do love me in a—a quite strange way. I am sorry."

She was too shaken to stand any more, then, and had made him leave her.

35

. . . There had been several other encounters but the only one in which any new or significant light had been shed, for her, upon the nature of Walt's feeling had occurred two days later. In the interval Davy had spent one evening with the family under Walt's eyes. She had been a little uneasy, but Walt had been gay and poised—all his usual self—and, if anything, had made the visit easier for Davy. She could see, as they sat there, that Walt didn't dislike young Sayre and she realized that when he had said he couldn't believe she was in love with Davy, he had said it all. He wasn't jealous (but he ought to be, if he loved her). *Why* wasn't Walt bitterly jealous, anxious? *Because he had something which Davy couldn't take from him.* That was it. He didn't love *herself*, Esther; he loved his embodiment of her. And such love, though it appealed

to her as romantic and astounding, and though it *did* move her like a beautiful passage of poetry, was unreal. Just that. It made her, the flesh-and-blood her, a shadow; the ghost of the being he loved; and it affected her like a hallucination, almost made her skin creep. She hated it!

She must tell Walt so and *make* him understand, even if to do so was to shrink herself in his eyes. After all, whatever she did would not hurt the figure of his worship and if she were only flesh and blood, she couldn't help it and she didn't want to be anything else. It had been very wrong of her to let him kiss her, put his arms about her; but she had been taken unawares, not so much by his swiftness as by the overpowering pounce of her own imagination, visualizing Davy . . . She could extricate herself, if need be, at a heavy cost; but get free of this she must, even at the cost of *that*. . . .

The next encounter, then.

Walt had found her the next evening burying her face in the rich clusters of the purple lilacs and they had walked down the road. The moist serenity of the May twilight had flowed around them and along all the horizons the pale, beautiful sky had shown or reflected bands of tender color. It had been perfect and they had gone a half mile or more, turning into the upland road that led them by the schoolhouse, before either had spoken. Then Walt:

"I love you, first and most, for *you*—for your Self. You know, don't you? that something in me is yours forever? It is so. They speak of love as if a man were the lord and master. A man may be lord and master afterward, but that is not the beginning. I wonder what *is* the beginning?"

The first awareness comes when a man understands that something which was his is wholly his no longer. He has moments when he feels . . . seduced, betrayed, outraged . . . and all the time he is in an ecstasy over it. She has done this thing to him and she has the security of his utter surrender before she makes her surrender. My darling woman, *that* is the miracle of love; you have wrought the miracle. A miracle . . . in Fifth Month . . .”

She had been profoundly stirred by his exposition. So much of it was true! and she knew, for her vital instance, that David Sayre was, in the sense of Walt's words, her victim, without knowing it. He never would know it, Davy, for he was too ordinarily masculine ever quite to understand what had happened to him, emotionally. Men didn't, except this one walking with her. She considered. She had decided that this great emotion which had come to him had made Walt unseeing. He could no longer penetrate her thoughts, easily, lightly, as of old. But in the light of what he was saying she thought she understood him even better. All his clear penetration was, for the hour, withdrawn from everything outside and focussed on himself. Where he had been used to read the feelings of other people he now needed all his faculty to read his own, in so unprecedented a turmoil. It was very marvelous but, somehow, it made her afraid. He was abnormal—specially gifted but dangerously gifted. In fact, he was, in one way, altogether too feminine. She meant, emotionally. His description of his own feeling, so extraordinary in its insight, showed that. He actually, unaided, understood himself and this was not the way of the well-balanced, usual man

who came only to a partial understanding of himself through the aid of some woman whom he loved and who, most important factor, loved him. . . . So much, unworded, Esther Terry grasped, and, unable to word it, she felt desperation stealing upon her.

“Walt, everything you say only proves to me how impossible it is . . . I do not love you and I know I cannot love you. I know—more. I know that what you love isn’t *me* at all. You would be terribly disappointed—wretched—when you found out . . .”

“Even if you are right, or partly right—even if I love you and more than you, the world I have built about you is secure, safe!” he exulted. “Say it’s self-deception—though I believe every lover could be called self-deceived. Self-deception is the one illusion that can never be destroyed.”

“Then it does not need me to save it for you.”

He tried frantically to retrieve: “Oh, but it does! Life without you is going to be just the self-deception and nothing else. Just illusion. You are to make the reality! Can you know,” his voice dropped and became a sound of tenderness and desire, “how suddenly real, how warm and sweet it became the other day when you let me kiss you, put this hand on your shoulder? Can you? . . .”

She had had to stop him, force herself free; her breath had been coming very fast and her head had burned just back of the eyes. She hadn’t been panic-stricken, not that, but the time had come to end . . . to put aside the thought of shame and *tell* him at any cost. . . .

“Walt! I *must* make you understand. I don’t love you.

I won't be able to. And I *do* love David Sayre. Listen; I have got to prove this to you, I know that. Well, then: All the while, the other day, that you were kissing me, I felt it was . . . Davy. And because I imagined it was Davy, I—I liked it. It shames me to tell you but it is the only way to make you know how I feel. Please . . . I don't want to be thought any worse of than necessary; I didn't do that, think of him, deliberately. Something, the thought of him, just leaped on me, took me unawares . . . *now* you must see! ”

She had been unable to keep back the tears, making a hot furrow down her cheeks and misting her eyes so that, when she had felt able to glance at him, she could not see very well the expression on his face. But she had understood well enough that he was suffering . . . and after an agonized interval she had caught his toneless words:

“. . . I suppose it might be easier if I could understand what you see in him,” he had been saying and she hadn't missed the pathetic appeal in the very tonelessness of his utterance, the note of bewilderment, like a man blinded and groping.

“I can't tell you what I see in him ”—and that had been the truth. She couldn't. She hadn't the words. Any words she could have managed would have made it seem very small . . . or perhaps almost indecent, shameful. . . . What she felt would be soiled by words.

She had had to struggle with a fierce resentment that it should be so, a resentment that wanted to vent itself upon poor Walt and hurt him on Davy's behalf and on her own, hurt him for what he had compelled her to put in words.

All the while she was talking to him, rapidly, this struggle had been going on.

“I can’t tell you what I see in him and, anyway, it would be useless; it is a thing you could not understand. There is selfishness in it—it isn’t all unselfish like the feeling you have toward me; perhaps it is a feeling less fine but I am sure I have it and I am sure it is the full meaning of love to me. I think you are not quite *human*, Walt. I don’t know how to say what I mean; you are made up so differently. Your mind works like a woman’s; you sense things; you used to sense things my father and brothers couldn’t; now you sense your own feelings in a way no man, no ordinary man, ever does. And there is something—well, *noble*—about you; and I love *it* without loving you. It is the poetry in you; it is what I love in passages of Shakespeare or any treasured book. But that would never belong to me; you couldn’t give it, I couldn’t share it; I could bring nothing to it, to *you*. I want to tell you something; I feel certain you were made for something great—some great accomplishment, some wonderful experience; but you were never made for just plain love, love of man and woman . . .”

That honesty had cost her a good deal. She had had to fight against a cruelty deep within her and her voice had faltered more than once. He had burst out in a harsh, ugly, hateful voice:

“You don’t know anything about it! You think I am ‘noble’? Made for something great? I am a healthy male animal, and I have healthy male lusts. I lust for you, for what you can give me, and I covet your eyes and lips . . .”

and you tell me I cannot have them. Do you want to drive me mad? for you may do that. Only"—she had shrunk back and he had stopped the reach of his hands for her, stiffening with a surprised look, as if the knife of her words had just reached his heart—"only I . . ."

Silence. Then, in a piteous accent:

"It has all been such a mistake. The thought of love came first. There is a curse on any man who thinks. I will never think again; I will live to feel. Forgive me. It was a mistake to try to make a beautiful world, built around a thought. A man might better never have lived than to do anything so foolish. Let him feel, and keep to the world he is born in."

She had waited.

"And now, when I do feel, it comes too late. Too late because your feeling has gone out to another, but too late, anyway, because you would rightly enough distrust my arrived-at feeling. And I know what I lose—know I shall never have it back, know it will never come again."

She had had in that instant a complete vision of what *she* was losing (for she didn't deny she *had* lost something, though feeling it was not a thing that she could have kept or that could ever have been truly hers). For a moment the sacrifice had seemed very heavy; not many women had offered them a devotion of such breadth and splendor. In his unselfishness he was terribly sincere. And his outburst about lust was nothing but maddened perversity; he had been *suffering*. She ached for him and for herself, and then a slow, wonderful sense of triumph had invaded her at this sacrifice she was making . . . it seemed somehow

to bring Davy nearer to her and to make him more precious. . . .

Then they had walked back together—it was still quite light—and once he had reached for her hand and she had let him take it. He had held it a moment, his own seemed cold, and then had let it go. She had left him at the gate; the next morning, very early, he was gone without her seeing him.

And that had been all. Yes, all.

She had relived it this once and was finished with it. The memory of her would fade with him. . . . Dear, homely Davy! If you could know how much I shall love you, how much I can bring to you! . . . But you, Walt, were made for loneliness everywhere; there is a place in you where no one, no *one*, could quite enter. You showed it to me, just lifted a curtain, but I let it fall. . . . I should like, some day, to see you again; to have you for my friend, my friend and Davy's (you would be his true friend, too, you know). And now . . . good-by, Walt . . . dear, great, lost lover . . .

36

. . . And afterward . . .

Long afterward, Walt was able to sum up all that happened from his first sight of Esther Terry on his return to the farm until their final parting in those two commonplace, worn words, uttered every day of our lives and always lightly, the comic mask for our deepest griefs—the two words: “Of course . . .”

Of course she had had her woman's clairvoyance unfail-

ingly with her. Of course she had been right—and wrong; and he had been right—and wrong. Theirs had been a misunderstanding complete, inavertable, irrevocable; impersonal, also; rooted not in character but in sex, or rather, traceable to the very beginnings of life and as mysterious and inexplicable as the Thing which impels the simplest, most rudimentary cell to split apart, becoming two whole cells that remain disunited.

He was able to see this: The severing proved, of itself, their preëxisting oneness.

Hence Identity; from this scar of experience, a knowledge of all lesser experience, a perception of the original unity of all experience and of the underlying common Identity of every living soul.

This miracle . . . in Fifth Month. . . .

37

What had most dismayed Walt as he faced Esther Terry in the hour of his return was a strange and sudden piece of self-understanding accompanied by the birth of passion within him.

The piece of self-understanding, he supposed, might come from the accident of his having met first, and so few minutes earlier, Esther's brother. Between brother and sister the physical resemblance was strikingly complete. He had always felt for young Freegift Terry a strong physical attraction coupled with the emotion of affection. It had been something in the boy's face . . . so far as Walt had been able to give an inner accounting. Now he compre-

hended that his feeling for Freegift had adumbrated something larger, intenser, and something now fully upon him.

For with this curious knowledge which, pleasant or unpleasant had distinctly to be faced, came, though separately, an emotional impact that it was not in him to withstand. This was the birth of passion, he somehow knew even as it racked him; and in the midst of an unprecedented storm and stress he recalled the identifying words from the lips of Herman Melville: "There is a stage . . . beyond which the affair passes out of our hands."

That stage he had arrived at; a fundamental change had been effected in him and with what was immediately ahead for himself, for both Esther and himself, his will could have nothing to do. His nature was at the mercy of another's, for this hour. And afterward? For the first time in his life there did not seem to be such a thing as the future. He supposed that was because he was actually living in it and it had become his present. . . .

He had felt himself a clod, at the sight of her, for her poise, her brightness had the effect of making everything else inert and unalive. He had felt himself a prig, for he had talked in his utter fatuity to Jenny and to Sarah Purrier, both of whom knew things he had yet to learn (and could, perhaps, being a man, never learn). He had felt himself an utter fool . . . for not until this moment and this confrontation had he comprehended what love is. And so riving was that comprehension that the twin desires tore at him—the desire to show her his infinite tenderness, the stony wish that she had never been born. . . .

In their first talk he had controlled himself to say:

“Esther, I came back because I’ve discovered I love you.” That was near enough to truth, since he knew, now, that he did love her. Of what avail to have said: “I came back because I thought I might be in love with you. And I set eyes on you and knew it to be so?” . . . No matter. She had answered, very gently:

“Walt, I couldn’t ever marry you.”

Then he had voiced his honest incredulity. He couldn’t believe she was in love with Davy Sayre. He had seen too deeply into her, in those weeks of living under one roof; he knew her imaginative quality, her tastes that the young farmer from Smithtown could never share. There was nothing ambrosial about *him*; and her clear-sightedness must tell her—

“I can’t believe *you* are in love with *me*.”

She wasn’t in love with young Sayre, then! Her shifting the ground on which they trod, clearly implied it. She was appealing to him for proofs, for the exact honesty that his first declaration had evaded. In a rush of chivalrous feeling he had met the appeal:

“Oh, but I am! I’m not self-deceived—now. . . . The thought of love came first, the thought of you afterward; but one led surely to the other. And then I began to suffer. . . . Don’t you see what you have done to me? don’t you?”

She must. Being a woman, it was impossible that she shouldn’t. Being Esther, she would be honest with him. But it was natural she should move toward admission with a certain reluctance. Along this new path, one was constantly skirting one knew not what precipices.

"I can see you have changed, somehow."

Brave and plucky girl! His heart praised her. Now, to test her advance:

"How?"

And at the beginning of her answer he had heard certain syllables like the light, dry rattling of stones on a treacherous mountain path; and then without warning his secure foothold had crumbled away under him:

"You . . . met some one, or heard something. . . . You thought of love, then you thought of me . . . wrong way about. . . . If I were ever to love a man . . ."

Her voice came to him from an immense distance over the brink beneath which he lay, for the moment stunned.

When he could talk he had disputed her contention that the thought of "that one" must come first, the thought of love coming afterward. Had disputed it in the only effective way, by the picture of where he *was*, of the arrived-at condition, the reached goal. Only by means of such a picture would she grasp the immateriality of the road he had traveled. What had he said? He had opened with an acknowledgment that, perhaps, he was so unlucky as to travel alone. ". . . To be different is unlucky. But it need not last. . . . We yoke young people and mostly they team well. I thought it over—much. And I saw something of what it meant. . . . There needed to be passion. . . . But more than that was needed. A great faith in life itself was needed. . . . That would last because it was the true passion . . . so big you could never pass beyond it . . . enclosing and outreaching the very stars! . . . real, because self-created. A man is a new Adam in a universe

of his own fashioning and at last he fashions a woman, really from himself, to share with him all its loveliness and beauty and grandeur."

As he had talked the words, the phrases, had welled up out of him; yet in the act of uttering them some deep instinct had remained unsatisfied. He knew already what it was. It was the artist-instinct which remained obscurely baffled in his effort to make and recite poems. And its constantly-reasserted presence made him angrily unhappy. What! could it not leave him alone in this crucial hour of his life? could he never for one solitary instant be rid of its critical, detached gaze and its imperious demands? He hated it, sitting forever in a corner of his consciousness like a creature you could never banish from your sight. Now when his life, or his happiness (which was the same thing) depended on his perfect freedom to become what *she* might require him to become, this creature, with cold eyes, kept him from the perfection of surrender. And it did this—how? Merely by criticizing his efforts, by pointing out to him the ridiculous inadequacy of his words, by too audibly declaring to his innermost ear:

"You fail in self-expression; always have; always will. You cannot make her know. You cannot make her the perfect surrender you wish because you have already given me a lien upon you. You gradually awoke to my existence in your house, in your brain; you did not stifle and crush me; and you cannot, now. Here I sit and appraise everything you think, and feel, and do; here I sit as long as you live and (who knows?) it may be longer. I will goad you with a merciless goad, and you shall do what I

impel you to do; and the greatest thing you do will not be feast enough to glut me. In this inspired love of yours you are making your first and most desperate attempt at self-expression in the one form in which the millions of men achieve it. And how? With words. But they do not use words. They utter a series of sounds of conventional meaning. Words? You fool! All that you can say will be but a shadow, not even edged with flame. . . .”

What Esther had been replying had come as an echo, merely:

“ . . . It isn't I you love, but what you . . . build around me. Something . . . fashioned 'really from yourself.' . . . An afterthought. You will never persuade . . . that way.”

It was not the echo but that inner sound of scornful laughter which had stung him to take her in his arms; and then began an ecstasy and wild delirium of the senses. To have her throat under his lips . . .

38

In the succeeding days *that* had remained the supreme moment in which, for however small an interval, he had escaped the merciless critic within. And not from any sensual standpoint but because he knew she could give him this escape, this deliverance, Walt looked upon Esther as priceless. It was true the deliverance came through the senses but he was clear that it came untarnished. And the possession of her could render it perpetual. . . .

This revelation gave him calm, and pure happiness in the confident expectation of assured future happiness. He

looked around at—and through—all the world. Life for those incomparable hours was like looking into the placid, penetrable waters of a wide lake. He understood at last the fable of Narcissus. He felt as if his true self existed only as something mirrored in her eyes—her eyes flecked with golden-brown like still waters percipient of sunshine. In a dawn of splendor, he lived, gay, poised, involved in a rapport which communicated something from the dead to the living and from the living to the unborn.

Are you stifled? O inner critic? Are you silenced, excommunicated at last? You have declared that I shall never know the satisfaction of achieved self-expression; what have you to say any longer? Have I answered you? Yes, I think I have answered you. What you called a shadow is a clear, invisible flame. What you said I could not compass, I have compassed. The artist in me is satisfied; I have risen to manhood, am become one with my kindred . . . love and death and dust, and love upspringing . . . and shall fulfil the cycle which is alone completely, wholesomely human, and therefore alone the highest, final art.

Art, he reflected, is like life, perpetuated only through the intercession of the senses, yet constantly besought to despise the senses, like children who should be entreated to deny their own mother as some one beneath them. For his part he would never hereafter make the mistake of assuming that because a thing was sensual it was base. One might as well call the red earth degrading. Nothing was, in itself, either coarse or fine; in what it brought forth all virtue resided.

. . . And he looked, without anxiety or rancor, at young David Sayre, come over to spend the evening at the Terry homestead. He felt a wide friendliness for the freckled face beneath all that thick, unruly, red hair. What a wholesome fellow Sayre was! and it seemed to Walt that the young farmer was healthier and more wholesome than himself in the simple, usual, important respects . . . unimaginative, but for that very reason, unexacting; like the locust tree for endurance; a stalwart figure whose inertness had the effect of a rude but magnificent repose. Slow-tongued, kind, faithful . . . when I say emphatically that he is faithful, Walt asked himself, just what, to the curl of the last planed shaving, do I mean?

Well, his faithfulness is plainly the superbest thing he will have to offer any woman; it will not be restricted to a narrow faithfulness to her as a woman but will employ her, quite unconsciously, as the finest, most delicate, cherished instrument by whom and through whom he keeps his faith with the race. By her and through her—through the union they make and the home they build and the children she bears him; what they sow and the harvests they reap—he will accomplish himself and she will accomplish herself. That is to keep the faith. . . . And I, I—Walt Whitman? And you, Esther? Shall we not do likewise?

You are to make it possible. Through you alone, will it be possible for me. Through me alone, it exults me to know . . . now . . . will it be possible for you. Because we shall be more fully conscious than all these others, these hundreds and these thousands of fellow-men and fellow-women, we shall make a deliberate beauty where, momen-

tarily groping, they achieve none. The material is human clay? Then you and I will be aware of the ultimate, perfected shape the clay is to take under our fingers; its transitional and ugly and meaningless shapes will not obscure for us the emerging Design. . . . Or say that the lives of two joined together are like to a piece of music; then where others struggle through discords, we will move upward through planned and cunning modulations; and where all those, caught in a web of half-tones and a maze of uncertain intervals, wander at times without an Ariadne-thread in the labyrinth of tonality, we two will sing, will triumphantly improvise, in resolving keys and in every mode. . . . *Venite, missa est.*

The great curve of Dante's line swung its immense arc over Walt's thought as he looked at Esther's head, inclined forward in the firelight. Love, that moves the sun and the uttermost stars . . .

39

She stood in the day's decline close to the bush of purple flowering lilac, putting her white cheeks deep among the clusters; the strong yet delicate odor of the blossoms constricted his throat. The walk together along the upland road, their nearness, the intimacy of twilight, had meant more to him than any words. It had been the severest effort of his life to approximate his feeling at that hour in any words.

"I love you, first and most, for *you*—for your Self."

That had been the first, firmly-sounded chord of his frank confession. She might know full well what was in his

heart to say, nevertheless it was owing her that he should endeavor to say it. And so:

“. . . The first awareness comes when a man understands that something which was his is wholly his no longer. He has moments when he feels . . . seduced, betrayed, outraged . . . and all the time he is in an ecstasy over it.”

. . . What was it she had finally said?

All he was declaring, she had told him, only proved to her how impossible the whole thing was. She didn't love him, knew she couldn't love him. He didn't love *her*, or what she felt was her (“I know that what you love isn't *me* at all”). He would be wretched with disappointment. . . .

No, no! Pass over all that. Pass over his yielding answer in which he tried to face with candor the part of love which is self-deception. Pass over their *words*, fugitive and ephemeral. Pass over . . . pass over.

Pass to the moment when his short, thick, shaking fingers had touched lightly her shoulder, his young face coming close to her young face and his hungry eyes imprisoning those eyes of hers that, like dappled birds, fluttered and struggled against the slightest surrender. Pass to the instantaneous escape.

“. . . All the while, the other day, that you were kissing me, I felt it was . . . Davy. And because I imagined it was Davy, I—I liked it. . . . Something, the thought of him, leaped on me. . . .”

“Ye know that the Book is sealed with seven seals . . . and it hath been foretold that as the seals are opened there shall appear four horses with riders . . . on the white horse rides a conqueror, on the red horse rides a slayer with sword, on the black horse is mounted famine, on the pale horse rides pestilence”—

the red horse and the black; left and right; slash and starve—*“the immortal great do not find their sublime fulfilment in sex”*—what is fulfilment? Die once; begin again—*“he is ready with the gift of his Self, in its finest flower; but the gift may be denied”*—light laughter and the sound of a savage voice: *“What then? Why . . . religion, or lust, or the muddy river, or the ruthless reach for money, or a bullet in the breast in battle, or the extreme unction of the all-merciful sea! What then? . . .”*

And in the midst of the jumble of voices another voice which had kept reiterating, with something nasty and menacing in the soothing quality of its uninflectedness:

“People never know it when they are going insane. People never know it when they are going insane. . . .”

Like an anodyne, that baneful murmur; a cooling mumble to a child who, all the while, feels himself in a remorseless, unrelaxing grip. Steady . . . steady; this isn't going to hurt you. And all the while it *is* hurting you . . . annihilating you.

A senseless part of you goes on, in a silly way, all the time, behaving on the whole quite naturally and inventing and uttering thoughts and tags of things. You suppose something. Anything, so long as it's out loud.

“I suppose it might be easier if I could understand what you see in him.”

You don't. It wouldn't.

“I can't tell you what I see in him.”

She means she won't try. Nice little lie; can be minted more satisfactorily if alloyed, strengthened, with truth. So—

She can't tell you what she sees in him and, anyway, it would be useless; he couldn't understand. There is selfishness in it—it isn't all unselfish like your own feeling

toward her; perhaps is a feeling less fine but represents the full meaning of love to *her*. And you yourself are not entirely human . . . you are made up so differently. You sense things, your own feelings too, in a way no ordinary man ever does. You are rather—*noble*—and she loves that in you without loving *you*. . . . But that would never belong to her. She can bring you nothing. You were made for greatness, but not for just plain *love*, love of man and woman. . . . Every word tests the alloyed, minted lie which gives forth a bright, silvery ring of a “working” truth. . . . Minted words, minted lies, each stamped in relieve with her profile which, head slightly lowered forward, he saw gleaming palely so close to him in the Fifth Month twilight. The head of one of those goddesses, beyond the realm of truths and falsehoods, whom the Greeks had worshiped—goddesses who were women, too. Expressions, those goddess-women, of the highest art, which consists in the violent dissonances and the subtle accord of living . . . becoming, being; becoming, being . . . endlessly . . . the passionate ecstasy of the senses set to the grave rhythm of the heart. . . . The sole intercession was through the senses.

“ . . . You think I am ‘noble’? . . . I am a healthy male animal. . . . I lust for you, for what you can give me. Do you want to drive me mad? for you may do that. Only—”

A tremendous chord of agony, struck out of nothingness on every nerve in his body, stopped him.

“ Only I . . . ”

Stammered. Then a blank. Then a peaceful ebbing-

back of consciousness with the complete yet quiet comprehension of a world thrown down. Like birth? No, because birth carried with it no such awareness. Like death, in which an awareness ceased, only, perhaps, to be born again. One died, immediately awaking with the thought: Of course this is not the same existence; at the instant it seems oddly familiar but that feeling will vanish after a little . . . of course.

How did one go on talking to some one in the world just quitted? Oh, yes! One made a strenuous effort of memory and . . . and recaptured the lingo, spoken and otherwise. And doing so brought one gradually but all, completely, back—back into the sad world of May twilights and lost lilacs. Confess you recognize your surroundings! Confess your failure to escape . . .

“It has all been such a mistake. The thought of love came first. There is a curse on any man who thinks. I will never think again; I will live to feel. Forgive me. It was a mistake to try to make a beautiful world, built around a thought. A man might better never have lived than do anything so foolish. Let him feel, and keep to the world he is born in.”

And cannot escape from. And . . . little, lifting ray of hope out of nowhere . . . may yet come to a knowledge of, and find a beauty in? Beauty? Nothing to do with happiness. Nothing . . . except as it might kindle happiness. You had to keep feeling, feeling . . . a pure, widening flow. Alas!

“And now when I do feel, it comes too late. Too late because your feeling has gone out to another, but too late,

anyway, because you would (rightly enough) distrust my arrived-at feeling. And I know what I lose—know I shall never have it back, know it will never come again.”

With those words, the last that had been uttered between them, he had had a brief, surprising physical sensation, as if she had touched him with a finger—immediately gone. They had walked the road homeward in silence.

Once, clutching and unclutching his fingers, he had felt something warm in his hand, but on perceiving that he had taken hold of hers, he let it go.

At the gate she had left him. Standing outside the whitewashed palings, close to the lilac bush tall-growing, held by its mastering odor, he had looked at the figure moving across the dooryard on which the old farmhouse fronted. A great star drooped in the western sky and in the swamp, in secluded recesses, a shy and hidden bird, a hermit thrush, in notes bashful and tender, sang by himself a song. . . .

40

*Once, Paumanok,
When the snows had melted—when the lilac-scent was in the
air, and the Fifth-Month grass was growing . . .*

For a few hours the oblivion of deep slumber. Waking shortly after midnight, mentally feverish and unable to resume sleep, Walt rose, dressed and slipping from the house entered a farm-lane fenced by old chestnut rails gray-green with dabs of moss and lichen. Here, in a forward April, the apple-tree blossoms fell in showers like delicate snowy meteors. The scent of lilac moved softly upon the breath of this May night.

In the northwest turned the Great Dipper with its pointers round the Cynosure. A little south of east stood the constellation of the Scorpion, with red Antares glowing in its neck; great Jupiter stared in the east. The sky was splashed with phosphorescence.

When the moon swam into view she imparted to the aspect of everything on earth shimmering and shifting color-effects of pellucid green and tawny vapor.

*Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle . . .*

He remembered a summer on this Long Island's shore when he had come upon a nest in some briers. Four light green eggs, spotted with brown. Every day the he-bird, to and fro flitting, keeping near at hand; every day the she-bird, crouched on her nest, silent, with bright eyes; daily himself, the curious boy, wary in approach, careful not to disturb, cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.

The song of the he-bird, praise of the downshining sun, fearlessness of day or night, of wind or weather, while they two were mated.

One sudden day, one fore-noon, when the she-bird was not crouching on the nest . . . returned not that afternoon, nor the next . . . never appeared again.

All the rest of that summer, in the sound of the sea, at night under the full moon and above the sound of the lulled sea, flitting from brier to brier, he had heard the remaining, solitary guest, the he-bird.

The song of the he-bird, an imploration addressed to

the sea-winds along Paumanok's shore, a promise that he waited till they should bring her back.

*Yes, when the stars glistened,
All night long, on the prong of a moss-scalloped stake,
Down, almost amid the slapping waves,
Sat the lone singer, wonderful, causing tears.*

He had been calling upon his mate, he had been pouring forth the meanings which I, the lover, know. He had lost his mate. I, who have not enjoyed—how do I know? But I do. Perhaps that means something. I have treasured every note. Surely, that must mean something.

Why, then a child, now a man yet by these tears a little boy again—why, once, and more than once, crept I down to the beach, silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows, searching out obscure shapes, listening to dim echoes, watching the white arms out there in the breakers . . . white arms, tirelessly tossing? Why did I harken? to what end, O my little brother of the sky, kept I the exact memory of your notes? and can I translate the painful burden of your remembered song?

*Soothe! soothe! soothe!
Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,
And again another behind, embracing and lapping, every one close,
But my love soothes not me . . .*

The moon, as to-night, had hung low, having risen late; the moon had lagged and hung low—perhaps heavy with love. The sea had pushed madly upon the land, with the untiring urgency of the lover. The solitary singer had seemed with his cry to search the sea and the moon and

the sky for the shadow of his beloved. At length, the aria sinking . . .

All else continuing, the stars to shine, the winds to blow, the sea like a fierce old mother incessantly moaning. What an inexpressible ecstasy came to me, the boy with his bare feet in the waves and the wind blowing his hair! To me . . . there must have been love long pent in my heart at last tumultuously bursting forth, for strange tears took a way down my cheeks and we were a trio; and to my boy's soul the old mother Sea kept sullenly timing her answers, hissing some drowned secret. I heard myself also mutely demanding of the singing bird that he answer, whether it was indeed toward his mate he sang or mostly to me, "for," I cried in my heart to him, "I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you, now in a moment I know what I am for. A thousand echoes have started in me, never to die!"

. . . Odor of flowering lilac. A sense of fixation so strong that it seemed to replace the fluidity called consciousness with something indelibly graven, tenoned in granite. A slow recession of everything but the immediate moment and his actual surroundings. The stone had sunk to the bottom of the pool; consciousness began to flow over it with now and then a little swirling on the surface of the stream, marking a site, a submerged obstacle or anchorage, a hidden position. Look! we can just see a ripple . . . that means the light must be coming.

Yes, see—to the eastward. Dawn.

A sound of footsteps. Turning, he saw young Freegift Terry entering the lane.

"Ho, Walt! Where away?"

The boy carried a milking-stool. Walt waited for him to come up, then:

"Say my good-bys for me, Freegift, won't you?"

"'F course. When'll you be back this time, Walt?"

"Ah! I'm off for good this time."

"Hold on, Walt! . . . Don't say that."

Freegift Terry came a step nearer. A knowing, yet timid look was in his eyes, meeting Walt's. He said:

"She—she's a fool, Walt. She's the *gol-blamedest* fool!"

Walt jack-knifed with laughter. The purge of it helped, vastly steadied him.

"No—no, Freegift! You ain't meaning jest that. You . . . wait. Whatever happens—you and some girl or other—you won't feel that way."

"I wouldn't let myself care for the best girl that ever lived!"

"Boy, it'd all depend on something you ain't got any control over, something in you that she'd have control over. . . . You don't believe that, no; and you won't believe it then any more than now. I didn't believe it—and I may not believe it some future time. Jest at this time, that's how I'm explaining myself to myself."

"Dave Sayre—he's nothing!"

"Freegift, I guess any of us is fifty per cent. what some one else makes us out to be."

I must get away, thought Walt, moved, as he stood looking at the boy's face, which was altogether too like . . .

"Well, we'll make it 'So long!'" he declared aloud and

heartily. "I may be back; I'll write, anyway. Maybe you'll hunt me up, come after me."

Freegift Terry dashed the milking-stool to the ground, said in a quivering voice:

"I'll go with you!"—but catching the instant negation of Walt's look—"You won't . . . you don't want me to?"

Walt couldn't speak; could only shake his head, wave his hand; and in another moment he was up the lane and away.

Away where? he asked himself in that boy's first words. But to this unscotched question he still found no answer. He was moving west on a road which, he knew, led into the Jericho turnpike. And so, if he kept his direction, he would be coming by nightfall to the outskirts of Jamaica. Was he going back to Brooklyn where so much of his boyhood had been spent? Or would he be turning north, shortly, to revisit Huntington?

Brooklyn was better. He thought, with a thrill of pleasure that surprised him, of Fulton Ferry, the magnificence of the harbor seen from Brooklyn Heights, of lower Manhattan walled about with ships, of Broadway and its stages and the oathbound brotherhood of the stage-drivers. Crack-o! with the whip and the large, rude jest. A boyish love of the daily adventure, a zest for crowds invaded him.

Yes, Brooklyn and Manhattan. It would be easy to live; he could set type in a printing office. That would give him a little money, enough, not too much. And would take only part of his time. Then, he'd be able to do a little writing. It wasn't as if he had never tasted success. Why, even when he was only about twelve he had had bits

in the Long Island *Patriot*, and a piece or two in George P. Morris's fashionable New York *Mirror*. How his heart had double-beat as he watched for the fat, red-faced, slow-moving carrier who distributed the *Mirror!* and the fine excitement as he cut the leaves, roughly, with a finger that trembled.

Starting *The Long Islander* in Huntington had been most splendiferous fun. He had bought a good horse and every week had traipsed over a slice of the Island serving his newspaper—giving a day and a night just to that. The happiest jaunts! going over to the south side, to Babylon, across to Smithtown and through Commack, getting acquainted with the dear old-fashioned farmers and their wives, stopping by the hayfields and experiencing a hearty and home-made hospitality everywhere; then, after a supper and talk, riding away in the dusk through the scrub-oak'd plain so perfumed with pine and the balsamic odor of sweet fern. . . .

Life had all such good times as those in it, too. . . .

Life? why life was *living!* that's to say, movement, translation, flux . . . but not just the flow of sensations, either. It was finding yourself in the midst of that incessant flow, feeling how it transformed you (never two hours quite the same creature, or the same identical substance) and submitting to the constant make-over, though with friendly tusslings and a good-natured resistance. There lay the fun; there wasn't any lesson but to *have* your fun. Ah, these sulky retreats! these wincings! They were just worthless.

*May-month—month of swarming, singing, mating birds—
the bumble-bee month—month of the flowering lilac . . .*

(Month of May twilights and lost lilacs.)

*And then my own birth-month. The lights, perfumes,
melodies—the bluebirds, grass birds and robins, in every di-
rection—the noisy, vocal, natural concert.*

Tympanist, a neighboring woodpecker, tapping his tree.

*A while since the croaking of the pond-frogs and the first
white of the dogwood blossoms. Now the golden dande-
lions, spotting the ground . . . the white cherry and pear-
blows . . . the wild violets with their blue eyes looking up
and saluting my feet as I saunter the wood-edge . . . the
budding apple-trees . . . the light-clear emerald of the wheat-
fields, the darker green of the rye. A warm elasticity per-
vading the air . . . cedar-bushes decked with their little
brown apples . . . convocation of blackbirds, in garrulous
flocks gathering on some tree,*

(Yet the saddest loss and sorrow of my life is close at hand, has just been experienced.)

A typical farmhouse hove in sight. Breakfast! But first I feel for a bath down there in that wide brook behind the shelter of those drooping willows. Ridded of the dust of the road, fresh, tingling, with no memory of a sleepless night, and a boy's morning appetite, so I'll be welcome at the farmer's table and good company to pay for my meal-ing. (I'll offer to do half a day's work; I'm in no hurry; I'll guide a plow and be making plans.)

He slipped behind the trailing screen of the willows and leafing briars, stripped and stood for several moments in

the sunshine, listening to the gurgle of the water and feeling a medicine in the sound. Then he doused himself. Shock! as the cold of the clear stream forced the breath out of his body . . . shock! and lesser shock! . . . How good this was! oh, good, good, good!

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO
GULF STREAM

I

“COSMOPOLIS, or chrysalis?”

Madison Slocomb laughed; and then, struck by the question, became abruptly serious. He gestured lightly about him and answered, with an alertness uncommon at the South:

“Who can tell? She is Nouvelle Orleans and she has not yet decided. Besides, although I was born behind her levees, I am scarcely more than one of her stepchildren. My father’s father was not a Louisianan, nor was my father native here. You will see, Mr. Whitman, you will see after the shortest sojourn below Canal Street, how one may be irremediably an exile in the city of his birth.”

“And yet you would import me, an utter stranger, to edit your new daily newspaper? Who will read the *Crescent*; who will buy a journal conducted by a Yankee outsider named Walt Whitman?”

“Oh, we exiles—we Slocombs and Hillhouses and Storys and the like who have no Latin blood. Besides, the number of us is growing very fast. And with a victorious army back from Mexico City, General Taylor and his aides in constant circulation, cotton going up and the town generally overflowing like a bursting bale—”

In succeeding days, loitering along the galleried streets, passing the shadowed, tunneled entrances to the houses, Walt thought he should never again see, as he had certainly never seen before, such a richly-colored animation. Not New York, not many-hived Manhattan with its ship-fringed littoral, compared with this crescent shore diked against the muddied Mississippi.

New Orleans had an air of being perpetually *en fête* under a canopy of blue emblazoned with gold; if the day darkened one looked instinctively aloft, expecting a shower, or deluge, not of water but of confetti. The streets were full of rattle—yes, *rattle* was the word! though by it was expressed not metallic sounds, not the hive's susurrus, but a combined precipitated effect as largely upon the eye as upon the ear: Driftings to and fro of soldiers, litters of the wounded and fevered, the bright uniforms of officers and the glint of sunshine on scabbards that dangled as they strode past; faces, dark, bright, easily smiling or stained with excitement, and complexions that were blue-white, pink-white, faintly yellowed, ivory-toned, turbidly-tinted like the roiled waters of the vast river, rose-brown and raw-coppery, polished-opaque ebony or dull, teaked black.

The faces of contained Yankee traders, of wealthy negro gentlemen who were men of family and owners of slaves; of indolent Creoles, French ladies, a woman of the camp followers, a religieuse . . . boys' faces bronzed, mustached river pilots, African masks, thin-lipped Spanish countenances and black-bearded men who looked like very much younger brothers of the demi-piratical Jean and Pierre Lafitte, lost lords of Baratavia.

The levees were white with cotton and the river steamboats, diagonally wedged, were infested with a race of stevedores while on the shore, carts, mules and blacks resembled a swarm so thick that one perceived movement only at the edges. Chartres, Royal, Bourbon, Burgundy, Dauphine streets. Place d'Armes with the Cathedral and the Pontalba buildings. Patterned wood blocks from Belgium, the ballast of ships, paving the roadways. Factors Row, the French market, and the Absinthe House. The new Opera House, the recessed barroom of the St. Charles Hotel, barroom of acreage rather than feet-square; the beautiful rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel and its wide sweep of waxed, perfected floor in the magnificent ballrooms. . . .

In the Place d'Armes, facing the open square as it seemed immemorially, the three great lions. But a better symbol of the present was a thing you could hold in your hand, a single, spilling cotton boll.

2

After his first few days in New Orleans, Walt saw little of Madison Slocomb. The merchant, with whom he had struck a match and an acquaintance in the lobby of the Broadway Theater, New York, was affected by the restlessness of the period, nothing more. Carried North by a bit of business, he had taken with him a vaguely cherished and sentimental idea of founding a newspaper. Why not? Look at the *Picayune* and the *Delta*! They had sold almost in bales, like cotton, read everywhere from the planters' great houses to the river bank. The letters of Chaparral and other war correspondents explained much of this avidity, no doubt;

nevertheless, people now hankered for the news, or at least for the newspaper, as they hankered for their *café lait* at the coffee stalls—would hereafter insist upon one as fully as the other. Simple! Besides, the price of cotton was going up, up, up all the time. Every one had money. . . . A newspaper of one's own was a special hobby, like a good stable. Enough if it paid its way after a little; it needn't *make* money. Let cotton do *that*. . . . Slocomb had been mightily taken with this young fellow, this Whitman—not quite twenty-nine yet, with experience as a printer and writer; had for the last year or so edited the *Eagle* newspaper in Brooklyn; gave him \$200 and told him to start off down the the Mississip' and he was as good as his word, came right here and rolled up his sleeves and set to work; tall, with a fine, open face, gray eyes that look straight at you, black hair and beard and easy, square, powerful shoulders; an upstanding fellow all right! Thus the pleased merchant to some cronies in the cool comfort of one of the Canal Street clubs.

Walt, on his side, was more than satisfied with a job in which, after all, nothing more was expected of him than a routined, capable performance. Nearly eight years in New York and Brooklyn, years in which he had constantly contrived to rub against and study all sorts of people, enabled him to read correctly the mind of his employer. This was essentially an easygoing soul, this chap Slocomb. And I like an easygoing soul for my master, Walt declared to himself, with a candid laugh. I am probably, yes, certainly in many particulars, a loafer, as plenty of persons have called me; it doesn't follow that I am a slouch. I am no

slouch at the type-case, for example. But one of these typical tramp printers, whiskey-fed and bible-backed, I could never become. Nor one of these peering, desk-ridden writer-hacks and editor-hacks, could I ever become. They will have to plant me among the daisies first.

He had abandoned his desk and was strolling through the iron-grilled avenues of the *arrondissement*, the old Spanish and French city, and thinking how extraordinarily unlike his favorite Manhattan all this was. He missed, though as yet not badly, the jolly group of congenial spirits who were always assembling, afternoons, at Pfaff's Broadway place, grouped about the long table extending the length of the cave under the sidewalk, drinking, eating, chaffing, smoking. He missed the Broadway omnibuses and their riproaring drivers; most of all he missed the Fulton Ferry. . . . I must quit this mood of comparison, he thought, or I'll work myself into a state of fancied mournfulness in which I'll have no true perception of the new things all around me, things and people different, curious and full of discoveries for me, if only I'll make myself eligible to know them. And I want to know; I guess that is all I want, presently.

Then, which? For there are in all New Orleans just two places where I might make a beginning of human wisdom. One is the levees; t'other is the barroom of the St. Charles or the St. Louis. Let it be the barroom for I am deathly-thirsty and hanker for a cobbler with strawberries and snow topping the tall tumbler . . . or a few swallows of the mild, delicious French brandy. . . .

The immense barroom, place of polished woods and gleaming glassware, resembled, in its intent activities, a roofed,

polite public forum. The number of the inhabitants drinking wasn't many, only a percentage at any hour or minute. In alcoves men sat and mingled the intermittent transaction of business with much social gossip and political argument. In a corner, or more accurately, a quarter, an auction was going on. Walt drifted toward the cluster of some dozens of men, mostly frock-coated with broad-brimmed hats, who surrounded the auctioneer, as aloof from the rest of the room as if divided from it by partitioning panels. A speculator for falling prices was being sold out. The auctioneer was delicately humorous. "My client, gentlemen, wishes to dispose of all his effects as he has engaged to take General Santa Anna on a b'ar hunt in a neighboring parish." The crowd laughed and some one said, in a clear drawl: "Let b'ar eat b'ar."

Drifting back to the bar, Walt found himself alongside a man who drank his brandy in uncritical gulps. Br-r-r! He was shivering, for all the warmth of the day, this fellow; must have ague; his teeth chattered.

"Back from Vera Cruz, *amigo*?"

The face turned toward Walt was, for all the chap's discomfit, humorous, valiant and winningly Kelt. A sentence in Spanish, meeting Walt's headshake, was succeeded by English, brogue'd despite a formal manner that testified to education.

"I'm saying 'tis a deal farther than True Cross I'm coming from. Your name, may I ask?"

Given, and the Kelt responded:

"'Tis José O'Donoju—D-o-n-o-j-u which was wanst

D-o-n-o-h-u-e—saluting you, Mister Whitman. What'll you be drinking with me, sir? ”

They loitered over an exchange of glasses, making acquaintance rapidly and freely.

“ Up from the South I am, Friend Walt,” explained José O'Donoju, whom now the good brandy had warmed and steadied.

“ The South? ” Walt asked.

With a rollicking laugh, the other commented:

“ And a wee bit puzzled you are to hear me say that. I'm found by you in what, I doubt not, is your furthest South. But I am meaning the other hemisphere entirely. You must not be after forgetting the world is round both up and down as well as sideways.” He gestured comically; took off and re-settled on his head a gold-laced military cap, exposing close-cropped hair which, in a long growth, would perhaps have been the burnt orange that had evidently been the original color of the narrow, short, bleached strips of hair covering the cheekbones. His lean, tanned young face was, on the whole, aquiline, adventurous and aristocratic; Irish in contours, Spanish in the delicate abbreviation of sidewhiskers, youthful in being otherwise so smooth-skinned and clean-shaven.

“ Down in the region of another river, a slightly lesser Mississippi, La Plata, we are having bloody war,” he was declaring. “ Your little excursion to Mexico City, if you will pardon me for so saying, is no proper comparison. D'ye know that Montevideo has been under siege for five years? but of course you wouldn't.”

"I've heard of Francia, the Paraguayan dictator," Walt said humbly.

"Who has not? They call him El Supremo. He is dead. You should meet some of our live ones!"

"What's an Irishman doing in those parts?"

"Never ask an Irishman what he's doing away from Ireland. Fightin', to be sure—what else? But is José O'Donoju all Irish? Ah, most likely. What's the strait betwixt José O'Donoju and Joseph O'Donohue? Although I've an ancistor was cast ashore in a bog after the shipwreck of Philip's Armada; he was a Spanish Mendoza, a grandee of ould Spain. I was at Trinity in Dublin, then at Oxford before I grew restless and spoilin'."

"Seems to me I've heard tell of an O'Donoju in Mexico, years back. Wasn't he the last Spanish viceroy, 'bout 1820 or '22?"

"Sure, *amigo* 'tis my half-brother you mention; but he was old enough to have been my uncle and we saw little of each other."

"Well, Señor O'Donoju, you may come from farther but you can't be any more of a stranger hereabouts than myself."

"Is that the way of it?" Two brown eyes, lit with easy friendliness, became instantly sympathetic. "*Por Dios*, Amigo Walt, you mustn't be lonely in a town where I have a hundred good friends! Come with me. Do you know the family of Fleurus, or have you had Raoul Dumouriez pointed out to you? No? Have you been a guest at Casa Callava? That is all wrong. I live to set such wrongs right, taking care to enjoy meself the while. *Allons!*"

3

So it was that, within twenty-four hours, Walt found himself as completely in a new world as if the gallant O'Donoju, bent upon mad adventure, had whisked him off to another planet.

This was a world truly cosmopolitan and yet incredibly provincial; as old, in effect, as Europe, and as new, in fact, as the nineteenth century; a world which was founded on lineage and went on by means of dynasties; and yet, contradictorily, a world that toyed with devastating ideas, so that the young people in it seemed to Walt like children dicing with cubes of dynamite. To Jeanne Fleurus, the leader of that *cercle*, he said one afternoon, while their acquaintance was still merely days old:

“Mam'selle, you make me think of another lady, Pandora. She opened a chest, you know—”

The Creole, with a low, running laugh, interrupted him.

“It was a powder-box, filled with *poudre de riz*, was it not, M'sieu' Walt Whitman? La Pandora, she wished to powder her nose.”

“It was a powder magazine, from what I've heard. But that's just it! You must 'amuse' yourself, as you say in French; you do not care if you powder your nose with gunpowder.”

“But, yes! I do, much. Gunpowder would not make me more becoming. It would deface my looks.”

Walt gave her the open consideration and admiration of her charms thus called for. Mlle. Fleurus met his look with a smile that seemed to contain nothing but a disarming

candor. For instance, it was not at all bold; and if a quality of assurance was behind the smile, the assurance was perfectly concealed. What Walt contemplated was a face of the type preserved for posterity by painters of the French court. It was small, classic in feature, gay in repose; it had a blended air of dignity, of being born famous, of having been bred to a place and a rôle. The differences from the Versailles portraits were few. There was a rosy tint at the margins of the smooth complexion, a certain duskiness of warm color under the shadow of the masses of blue-black hair and under the eyebrows, where lids sometimes drooped over the intense black eyes. Again, there was the mouth, sensuous, innocent, sweet.

She was of distinguished beauty even in a society which had dozens of beautiful Creole women quite as young as she. And that was not too young, for there had been the years in a convent school, followed by a year or two in a school or seminary in Richmond; nevertheless, Jeanne was far younger than Walt, younger even than the twenty-six-year'd José O'Donoju, frankly her lover in quest of her hand.

This, so far, Jeanne and her father had not given him. The elder Fleurus, scion of the French régime, was a stout, middle-aged heritor of a rich import business, chiefly in fine wines; a jealous father. The other member of the household was Jeanne's aunt, her father's widowed sister. Madame Fleurus—she had been wedded to a cousin—seated a few feet away, was examining critically the gold lace on José O'Donoju's military *chapeau*, possibly with a view to copying it in lace embroidery that lay on the table beside

her. Now she handed back the stiffened cap to its owner, inquiring in French:

“And what is it that they would make of you, with this braid?”

“I? I am a general.”

“So! Pouf! He is a general”—her still handsome eyes directed upward, as if inquiring of heaven or, perhaps, the cupids posed playfully on the ceiling of the *sala*. “Of what, pray? Of a regiment of savages, of scarecrows!”

A very Irish grin appeared on the General’s face. He bowed low.

“Madame Fleurus has contempt for my gauchos, for our horsemen of the pampas. She belongs to the Blanco party. I suppose, Madame, you despise the great Garibaldi who is assisting us Colorados—Garibaldi, the liberator!”

“That man? Of course. Does he not wear a red shirt?”

Amid general laughter O’Donoju exclaimed:

“I shall order him a uniform from Paris. Then you will receive him, no doubt!”

“*Jamais!* You will have to order him a portion of the true religion, likewise!”

“Religion,” spoke up suddenly a white-faced, spectacled young man, introduced to Walt earlier as “Mr. Traubel.” He expressed himself with difficulty, yet with precision, in English. “Religion had better engage itself with our bodies, lest our souls take flight.”

Madame Fleurus looked at him angrily, but Jeanne pit-a-patted with her little hands.

“How good! Oh, if Papa were only here! He is too

fat and contented. Tell M'sieu' Whitman, M'sieu' Tr-rouble, about your great man in Allemagne, in Gairmany, *nom de*—what is his *nom*? Marzh? ”

“ Karl Marx, Mam'selle. A liberator! ”

“ Of course! Señor—pardon me, dear José!—General O'Donoju has his liberator, that Garibaldi; M'sieu' Trouble has his other, this Marzh. M'sieu' Whitman, please choose! ”

Walt turned with interest to talk to the young German, and found to his great satisfaction that he was talking to a revolutionist. As the handsome, crop-headed Irish youth had been his first acquaintance with a New World in birth-throes, so the pale, earnest disciple of Marx, a student and traveler, first brought before Walt the spectacle of an Old World honeycombed with revolt. Perpetually, it seemed, men struggled for emancipation; and Herr Traubel terminated a long and vivid account of seething Europe with a few words designed to place in perspective what, at the moment, had so largely the appearance of senseless confusion.

“ Tyranny, Mr. Whitman, assumes as many shapes as the Old Man of the Sea in that Eastern fable. It comes now from above; some day it may come from below. For centuries it has been manifested chiefly as political tyranny. For centuries, at least from the time of the English Magna Charta almost to the present and even in the present, men have struggled to throw off tyranny in its political shape. *Ja wohl!* though with the establishment of these American States and the bloody horror of the French Revolution, I think the back of political tyranny was broken. It remains to crack a few bones. . . . But look! As soon as you

throw off this Old Man of the Sea, this thing Tyranny, in one shape, it comes back in another, again fastens itself on you. The new form of tyranny will be, is, social—economic. Suddenly, just as we have triumphed over political tyranny, men make inventions in an unprecedented number. An ugly black monster, with an engulfing mouth, appears to swallow men and women, girls and boys, by the thousands. The factory! The worker is sucked from the soil and penned into cities. The loom is taken from his cottage and he must follow it. The tool is wrested from his hand and operated by a flywheel, his hand loses its cunning; where he made a pair of boots he does nothing but stitch soles. His work loses all variety; he loses his interest in it; it is a treadmill task. He owns his tool no longer, his home is gone, and his garden and scarcely he sees his own family. He is blind, harassed; he does not know how to struggle with tyranny in this new guise. But he will find out how. It may take him half a century, or a century, to find out what afflicts him. It may take him then as many centuries to throw off this new shape of tyranny as it took him to break the back of political tyranny. No one knows, but—let the struggle begin! ”

The words produced a powerful impression not only on Walt but on the others, who had fallen to listening. In especial, Jeanne Fleurus, her black eyes glowing, exclaimed:

“Do you hear that, M’sieu’ Whitman? And you, José *amigo*? But here in Nouvelle Orleans we talk of nothing but the great rise in the price of cotton, the scandal of the Dumouriez connection and the big Empire we are to create in Texas and the South and West. Or we translate French

verse, or render M'sieu' Poe into French. And José, he gallops on horseback among cattleherders. I hope, José, you use only the flat of your sword upon them."

"And in New York," took up Walt, "we talk of nothing but abolition or Booth and Forrest at the Bowery Theater or city or national officeholding."

"In a city of your Massachusetts State, Lowell, I have seen between seven and eight thousand young women, mostly from farms, who work thirteen hours a day in summer," said Traubel. "The factory bell rings at half-past four in the morning; at five the girls must be in the mill. They get thirty minutes, at 7 o'clock, to go to their boarding-houses, eat breakfast and return to the work; in thirty minutes at noon they must do likewise for dinner."

"And the pay?"

"Five cents an hour. But no one complains regarding the pay."

"At any rate, it isn't slave labor," offered Jeanne.

"Mademoiselle Fleurus, if you work like that you do not care at all whether you nominally own your own body. Some one else owns your soul. The true slavery is the effective control of the time and the occupations of some other person. In England, Karl Marx found it worse, or perhaps I should say, more widespread. Slavery? Your slavery of the blacks? Of course that, at its worst, is far more abhorrent; but very often, in fact, it is much better and more human."

Jeanne Fleurus, regarding idly her rose-nailed fingers, seemed to be considering something and as Traubel finished she looked up at Walt, remarking:

“ M’sieu’ Whitman, what is there so dangerous that you find in our playing with ideas? ”

The direct question seemed to throw Walt’s mind into even greater confusion—or was it chiefly an emotional disturbance he felt? Mlle. Fleurus prompted him.

“ You know, you said to me a while ago, we dabbled with gunpowder.”

With hesitation he responded, at last:

“ Mam’selle, all my notions are upset, flung in the stream and floating down with the current. I’d always supposed you Southern people were very provincial but here I touch worlds I never dreamed of in New York. New Orleans—we think of it as aristocratic and old; but I have to come here to learn what thousands of toilers are newly exercised about. Your French families, inherited customs, leisure, wealth; your long pedigrees—all that you take for granted and interest yourselves in an Empire of Texas or a Republic of La Plata or the prospects of bloodshed in Berlin.”

“ *C’est moi*, M’sieu’ Whitman! All that is Jeanne Fleurus. My Papa would groan over it, were he less placid. Nothing makes him groan except anxiety lest he may not quickly find for me a suitable alliance. In the meantime I won’t be ennui’d. Pending the day of my *salon*, let me have my *cercle*. If any interesting traveler, like M’sieu’ Trouble, comes to him with introductory letters, Papa shall bring him home. I have wrung from him this concession, under threat that otherwise I shall elope—”

“ *Avec moi!* ” exclaimed José O’Donoju, placing his gold-laced general’s cap over his heart, and bowing over her hand. Jeanne laughed.

“ You will make me Queen of—what is it? of Patagonia, eh, my General? ”

“ I will go back and liberate Ireland and you shall reign at Tara! ” uttered gallantly the voluntary exile.

The young men made their adieux, an immense relief in the face of Madame Fleurus having almost the quality of a benediction upon them.

“ I have a double errand, ” explained O’Donoju, as the three walked along St. Charles Street. “ I pay my court to Mlle. Fleurus and together, she and I, we bleed her blissed father for money for our South American cause. But that second thing is all very fair. If we should be after winning, he is to have the yerba mate concession. D’ye gamble? No? Too bad. I’ve gold that is burning a hole in me pocket. Oh, no, ’tis not gold for our brave Colorados, ’tis a bit of me own money. I’ll just go risk it while the feelin’ is strong that I can’t lose. ” He took leave of Walt and Traubel with a promise to look them up on the morrow, “ if me winnings don’t so burden me I have to keep playin’ to reduce thim. ”

Traubel and Walt moved away slowly to the office of the *Crescent*, where, Walt said humorously, “ I’ve no work to do except be handy for a visit from the owner, Mr. Slocomb. ” Finding a great similarity in their intellectual tastes, they exchanged ideas eagerly about Goethe and the philosophy of Hegel.

“ There is a comprehensiveness in Hegel appeals powerfully, I may say irresistibly, to me, ” avowed Walt. “ I don’t read German, worse luck, and have to depend on translations and summaries. People call Hegel cold, a callous

system-maker; he is too big for them, I guess that's all. Doesn't it come pretty much to this? Hegel says we can't have goodness without badness—not because one sets off the other but because both are parts of a *whole*. Isn't that it? Tell me, tell me!"

"You put it well for words so simple," Traubel admitted. "It begins with what he called the paradox of our self-conscious life—his *Negativität*. I never know what I am, but only what I was a second, a minute, an hour ago—yesterday, last week, last year. I never know what I am, all by myself, and I cannot. Cut me off from my fellows and what am I? Then I only know what I am *not*. I am not any longer any one's friend, nor any country's citizen, nor any man's son, or brother, or father. I discover I am nobody, and I never was anybody except with reference to some one, or something, else. You see?"

"Yes. Yes! . . ."

"Then—I have made a great discovery. I have no *self*. It is only a part of something larger. . . . To be somebody, anybody, I must be more than merely *I*."

"How great, fine! Peter was the rock on which was built a church; but on this truth can be built something greater than a church—the solidarity of the human spirit, the brotherhood of man!" Walt was ecstatic.

A vertical line in the forehead followed swiftly the smile on the pale face of the student and revolutionary but he said, with emotion:

"It is good to see such enthusiasm." He went on:

"Now, as to good and bad. I cannot be good by just trying for pure goodness. I can only be good by rejecting,

triumphing over, something bad. And if there were no bad, I could not be good; I could only be the one thing that existed in the world. No bad, no good; no vice, no such thing as virtue. This he calls the logic of passion, of suffering, of struggle. We are made so. We see all the contradictions—good against bad, and so on—but what we do not see, unless we look longer, is that *the contradiction is our way of seeing it!* Good and bad are the two faces of a coin, opposed aspects of something that includes both.”

“Wait! Answer me, and let me see if I grasp it rightly, fully. . . . Is there a soul? I mean what Emerson calls the Over-Soul; I suppose what most men mean by God—what most men really believe in, worship?”

“Yes!”

“Is it exemplified, embodied in occasional, rare men, in any one man? and I leave out all question of the divinity, or partial divinity, of Christ.”

“Not touching on the question of the divinity of Christ: Hegel says *No!* No one individual, by himself, exemplifies anything.”

“Is an essence of the soul, or the Over-Soul, to be found in each and every man—some tiny drop, we’ll say, in the poorest, worst?”

“Again, *No!*”

“Emerson’s mystical, of course. As I read him, he has a sort of sea of goodness, or fullness—an illimitable reservoir of the Over-Soul—ready to flow into the heart of every man. Like having water on tap in the kitchen.”

“That is hope, or faith. It is romantic, like Fichte. Hegel is not romantic. Neither is he vague.”

“Then? . . .”

“You, in your life, thoughts, acts, goodness or badness are one fleeting aspect of that Soul. So am I. So are all men who ever lived or shall live. It isn’t embodied in you but you are a facet, a glimpse, of It. It is not an essence in each of us but we collectively *are* that essence. Like drops of water that make the ocean. But only *all* the drops, and only when *knitted together*.”

“What a grand, sublime doctrine, gospel! And to come to our New World from that Old! I swear I must learn German and study it. But here’s the office. Come up, do! . . . Well; but look: I must see you again, soon and often. What do you say? Come around in the morning, afternoon—any time. That’s right, that’s right. I’ll look for you!”

4

Walt found Madison Slocomb waiting for him. The owner of the *Crescent*, seated at ease and cheerfully humming an air from last night’s opera—Bellini’s “Norma” had been sung at the New Opera House, with Grisi; and the hummed air was “Casta diva”—looked up with a smile, exclaiming:

“I’m afraid I’ve neglected you a good deal! I mean, as a stranger in the city. As an editor, I purposely neglect you. Editors must have elbow-room, don’t you think so, in order to edit?”

“Gracious, yes! Takes a good deal of room, plenty of seaway, to be a great editor.” Walt was chuckling. “But a puppet can be made to dance in very little space.”

“Well, I want an editor, not a jumping-jack! Seems to

me you're doing good work. I like the paper; so do my friends. If you wanted to, I'd be willing for you to write political articles."

"Heaven's mercy, no. What would a Yankee say that you Southerners would listen to? I don't believe I have any politics, just now. I'm doubtful, dubitating. Beginning to feel like a new boy in a strange school." And Walt began telling Madison Slocomb of his meeting with José O'Donoju, afternoons at the Fleurus mansion, the topics treated by Traubel, and so on. Slocomb listened interestedly, saying:

"You are lucky. I don't know this Mr. Traubel, of course. I know of O'Donoju and I've a business acquaintance merely with the Fleurus father, the importer. We new families who have been here only a generation or two do not enter the Creole society except we marry into it. But the Fleurus connection is one of the oldest—pure French, except for a strain of Spanish blood in the early part of the last century. Now the Dumouriez family—between you and me I don't call Raoul Dumouriez anything better than a nigger."

"What is the 'scandal of the Dumouriez connection'?" asked Walt, recalling an allusion in Mlle. Fleurus's talk of the afternoon.

"Eh? Oh, you mean Raoul. He's taken a placée since his marriage with the Antoine heiress." The merchant, seeing Walt's mystification, went on, explanatorily:

"Raoul is a sang-mele, I believe—negro blood half a dozen generations back. But it wasn't for that I called him no better than a nigger, but because he's such a devil generally. Aristocrat, though."

“Hold on, Mr. Slocomb! What’s a placée? And I don’t understand; do the people here keep track of a negro strain half a dozen generations back? How do they distinguish?”

Madison Slocomb offered Walt a cheroot. “Oh, yes; forgot you don’t smoke.” He lit one himself, exhaled leisurely, and leaned back in his chair.

“It’s—complicated! First, about the infusion of black blood. That has been going on, more or less, of course, since the very beginning. Now, under certain circumstances, the thing is almost as much an institution as slavery. We have negroes, or, at least, men with a distinct strain of black blood, who are gentlemen, who are slave-owners, and whose standing among gentlemen is, for all practical purposes, as good as the best. And they are staunch defenders of slavery. Some of them are very rich, thoroughly well-educated, too. Their daughters are sent to Paris. When the girls come back here—often astonishingly beautiful women—they look up, not down and not, usually, on their own level either. Well, a white man cannot marry such a girl; I mean a union can’t be legalized. Though very often he falls genuinely in love with her. Her skin may be as white as his own, you know. . . . He declares his affection. She admits or denies her liking for him. If she admits a reciprocal affection, she refers him to her mother. The mother makes all the arrangements and if they are not satisfactory the girl and the suitor are parted. The girl may love him but she is acquiescent in the fashion of continental Europe, where she was educated.”

“But what arrangements does the mother make?”

“She ascertains the man’s circumstances. He must be

able to support her daughter and any children. He must furnish security for such support, and for her support should he ever leave her and an agreed, sufficient sum for each of the children. And 'support' means in a style as liberal as she has been used to, or perhaps better. . . . Suppose all this is settled satisfactorily. Rooms or a house procured in the right quarter of the city. The couple go to housekeeping. The woman goes about, as before, in her own circle—and it is wide. The man moves in that circle and his own. They go to parties and *bals masqués* together. She misses nothing she has been used to. . . .”

“What does she call him?”

“Her ‘husband.’ Why shouldn’t she? There are only two differences in that union from a formal marriage. The first is the omission of the legal ceremony. The second is that the woman does not enter the particular social circle in which her husband was born and in which, to some extent, he continues to move.”

“And she, I suppose, is his *placée*?”

“So she is called. As a class, these women are affectionate and almost without exception they are constant. The unions are generally as happy, often happier, than marriages.”

“And there is no stigma?”

“Oh, none whatever.”

“But what is done when the man comes to marry?”

“He may part from his *placée* or he may not. If he does, he makes the settlement agreed upon before their union. His affection for her, or her affection for him which stirs him with a feeling that the separation is cruel, may

lead him to pay her over and above the agreed sums. Where the man is making a family alliance rather than a marriage for love, he is pretty likely not to part from his placée but to support both establishments. Men who become strongly attached to their placées often never marry; they educate their children in the best style and at death leave them all their property."

"But the children?"

"Why, they can't be said, in our society, to be badly off. That is the advantage of an old, long-established society. The negro blood has been still more thinned. The boys, enriched, become planters; if they marry, they marry women with at least as much white blood as themselves. Some of the girls go abroad to societies where race distinctions are less marked, but most of them stay here."

"In turn, becoming placées?"

"Yes, attenuating the negro blood still farther. So now, what with this and the carefully-pedigree'd old French and Spanish families, you see how it is possible, as in the case of Raoul Dumouriez, to estimate precisely racial heritages."

"What is it you called him? Have you names for all the degrees of blood? I thought 'mulatto' and 'quadroon' were the only designations."

"Oh, Lord, no. They're elementary. If you'd get Madame Fleurus—the old lady—to talk, you'd hear half a dozen others. When I called Dumouriez a sang-mele I was employing the nicest distinction we bother with. That means, or may mean, that he had a great-great-great-great-grandmother who was pure black. As a matter of fact, I don't know that he had. Accurately, it means he is one-

sixty-fourth negro blood—but the only way I know it, or you, or any one else, is by the tradition of his pedigree. Physically, nothing whatever to indicate it.”

“ But he’s a devil.”

“ Decidedly. What I object to exclusively is the brute’s ugly disposition. What the Creole aristocrats object to is his taking a placée after his marriage with Mlle. Antoine. Or rather, the Antoines don’t like it. Before, was all right; after, is not quite the same thing. Not nice.” Slocomb grinned, lighting a fresh cheroot; he stood up, saying:

“ You’ve nearly made me forget my errand. I came in to invite you to the club with me for dinner. Then we’ll go to the theater.”

Walt assented, and was rewarded at the show at the St. Charles by his first glimpse of General Zachary Taylor, freshly returned from the wars. A short play was followed by the performance of Dr. Colyer’s troupe of “ model artists,” in whom the interest of the audience obviously centered, for their groupings and solo poses were received with almost boisterous applause. But, in fact, the theater was crowded with men, mostly young, uniformed and shoulder-strapped. Old Rough-and-Ready, Zach, the hero of Buena Vista, alone among the officers, so far as one could tell, wore the clothes of civil life. Walt studied the veteran commander with interest. Here was a man who had been just about Walt’s own age in the war of ’12.

“ Looks a good deal like Fenimore Cooper,” he told Madison Slocomb, “ as I once saw him, a few years ago, in a courtroom in Chambers street, New York, back of the City

Hall. Cooper was suing somebody for libel, I think, or else for pirating his stories; never was such a man for litigation—lawed right and left.”

“That’s General Pillow, over there.”

“Houseful of *militaires*. Look at Zach now!”

At something on the stage that struck him as comical, General Taylor, jovial at all times, was laughing unrestrainedly. Anything like conventional ceremony or etiquette was plainly as alien to him as to Andy Jackson. His large bulk shook and the many wrinkles of his sixty-four years, creased more deeply in the dark-yellow face, caused Slocomb to say:

“Blessed if he doesn’t look like an old alligator!”

“Instead of the next President of the United States!”

“I suppose there’s no doubt the Whigs will name him,” Slocomb admitted. “And with Van Buren and the Free Soilers bolting, he may be elected. It’s a joke, though. Zach’s a Louisiana slave-owner; besides, the dear old fellow doesn’t know whether he’s a Whig or a Democrat.”

“Whom are you Southern Democrats going to pick to run?”

“I’ll tell you a secret. We’re going to take Lewis Cass, of Michigan. It’s Calhoun’s counsel. He says we’ve got to take Northern men from now on. If we don’t win, Calhoun says call a convention and see what steps we had better take to dissolve the partnership.”

“You mean—withdraw from the Union?”

“I don’t mean it, nor like the idea, but that’s what it will come to, I guess.”

5

The next day being Sunday, Walt followed his usual custom of visiting the French Market in the morning. Particularly was he tempted by the Indian and negro hucksters—the persons, not their wares. Specimens of healthy manhood finer than these, he was thinking as he watched some of the Indians, straight and supple, couldn't be found; and as for the darkies a fellow could get infected with enough merriment, hearing them, to last him the week.

He sought out the enormous mulatto woman who sold coffee and biscuits. How huge she was! and he computed, from what he knew of human sizes and weights, that she must weigh fully 230 pounds. Her shining copper kettle, for all its immensity, was strictly in proportion. . . . Such coffee for breakfast, or at any other time, was outside all his experience.

The cup holding this nectar was at his lips when he caught sight, over its rim, of José O'Donoju, a few yards away. The South American general was smiling at a strikingly handsome woman of color, not dark, perhaps a quadroon. The smile, which was not much more, Walt judged, than a frank expression of admiration, appeared to attract some little attention. It was not returned, and after a couple of minutes O'Donoju ended it with a slow and polite inclination of his head. A second later his transferred gaze fell on Walt toward whom, producing instantly a smile of entirely another character, he hastened.

“Here's the turnin' of my luck, to rin across you!” He came up, stood still, and proceeded to turn first one, then an-

other, of his pockets inside out in a ceremonial manner. "Behold what is left; I'm meanin' to say, what isn't; I fell into the clutches of a club, on Canal Street in a fine white house. 'Twas a whited sepulcher, no less. There they introduced me to a game called boston." He looked at Walt menacingly. "'Twas not Boston you were by way of tellin' me you came from, was it? "

"Hell, no! " But Walt was laughing.

The victim of boston continued his plaint.

"With me last peso staked and sproutin' wings, who should tap me gently on the shoulder but Papa Fleurus. He drew me into a corner and in dulcet whispers informed me that a means of suddenly growin' rich had been newly discovered. I, like a simpleton, harkened. And what did the dear old *embustero* propose? That I give up the sacr-red cause of liberty and help him and his fellows in a crafty scheme to extend their Cotton Empire! "

"To extend? "

"Sure, my dear Whitman, all the wealth of the planters and all the skill of the politicians below Richmond is being expinded forty different ways for that purpose. Openly, they can but talk. There's Jefferson Davis says the Gulf of Mexico should become an American lake; some one else is generally raving about 'our manifest destiny.' It sounds grand, and had they a few men like Bolivar or San Martin or me countryman, Bernardo O'Higgins, the Supreme Director of Chile, I'm not saying something might not be accomplished; but they've no one better than fellows like Narciso Lopez, Walker, and a lot of lesser riffraff. They will filibuster in Cuba and Cintral America; get their pawns in

gun-running scrapes and leave them to be stood against the walls of calaboses and shot. Then some one like the legal light, Judy Benjamin, will pronounce a funeral oration over them, a thousand miles away, in the shape of an argument that shootin' them was unconstitutional but correct."

O'Donoju had been talking in an undertone, half-humorous, half-earnest, as he and Walt sauntered through the market; now as they left it the Keltic warrior, passing his hand wearily over his forehead, said, wholly in earnest:

"D'ye know, I'm positive if I'd make mysilf their tool, Papa Fleurus would consint to me as Mlle. Jeanne's husband. I'm tempted sore; if it wasn't for thinkin' I can persuade Jeanne anyhow, I believe I'd strike a bargain. *Dios!* how my head aches! I'll be leaving you now to get the saint's own sweet sleep." With a friendly wave, he was off.

Walt felt his desire to view the sights evaporate as he fell to thinking, not of the imperial conspiring O'Donoju had talked about, but of the phrase he had used about believing, or hoping, he could "persuade Jeanne anyhow." For all Mlle. Fleurus's character of independence, Walt could see, by this time, how difficult it would be for her to accept the gallant José without her father's consent. Probably, confronted by a *fait accompli*, a secret wedding or a runaway match, Papa Fleurus would acquiesce; but if he chose, no longer the indulgent parent, to be stern and unbending, then his daughter would necessarily become an exile from the only society she knew. Nor could the roving O'Donoju conduct her into any other acceptable society, unless it were abroad, in Paris, say. But that would be a very precarious

and doubtful enterprise. There were, in truth, as Walt said to himself, just two grand social climaxes, two achieved aristocracies, for the Southerner. One, South Carolinian, meant a pew in St. Michael's Church at Charleston and the right to attend the balls of the St. Cecelia Society; the other, Louisianan, was even more impenetrable, like these surrounding swamps and jungles in which the live-oak kept growing.

Thought of the live-oak renewed in him the loneliness from which he had lately been suffering. He had been struck by that tree, glistening solitary in wide flat spaces, standing all alone . . . without a friend or a lover near . . . standing so all its life and uttering joyous leaves of dark green. Moss hung down from its branches and its look—rude, unbending, lusty—had made him think of himself; but he acknowledged to a wondering envy of that tree: How could it stand there, uttering joyous leaves, without the presence or hope of a friend or lover? All my life? I know very well I could not. These past years I have enjoyed myself mingling with the crowds in Manhattan, making friends with both men and women, tasting every experience, I should suppose, life has to offer; the feast has been generous, varied. Is life like that? Is it a delicious banquet spread for epicures? and must he who suffers for genuine sustenance, nourishment, go hungry?

Absently he looked about to see where his feet had led him. St. Charles Street. Here were the mansions of the Creole aristocrats, here and on Royal and Toulouse Streets. Yonder, a little way, was the Maison Fleurus; across the

street in Casa Callava lived connections of the last Spanish governor of Florida. It was noon, and families were returning to their homes from the service in the Cathedral.

Walt became aware of some one standing alone in the shadow of the arched tunnel-entrance of one of the houses across the street and adjoining the Callava domicile. A house like its neighbors, galleried, with delicate iron grille-work, its façade merged in the panorama of the handsome street-front. It was a woman, and she was looking intently upon him.

His first surprise was succeeded by an extraordinary sensation of adventure. She was scarcely visible, dressed in some black stuff; her face was little more than an outline and he could not see her eyes at all. How, then, did he know (as certainly he *did!*) that he was the sole person she was observing? An inexplicable intelligence seemed to fasten itself upon him; his mind, brought sharply to the place and the minute, was cool, collected and precisely planning . . . or else exactly obedient. Which? It was no matter.

Without start or stopping, he continued along the street for some distance, then crossed leisurely and sauntered back on that side.

In some way, he knew just what to do. As he drew near the house, he lowered his head slightly as if intent on some thought unrelated to the errand of his feet. Unhasting, he approached the house and without looking up passed assuredly into the entrance, the shadow of which closed behind him like a silent door shutting out the street.

At one side, as with all these houses, was the staircase, of great breadth and polished treads with easy rises. His

foot was on the first step when he felt a slim hand placed lightly on his arm above the elbow. He turned, with a whispered "*Madame, vous voulez—?*"

And stopped, trembling all over. The touch of her fingers, the perfume that seemed to emanate from her dark, coiled hair . . . like flowering jasmine . . .

6

Apparently a habit of taking Walt to the club was fastening upon Madison Slocomb and as Walt relished the bouillabaise which was the club's special dish, particularly when followed by redsnappers stuffed with oysters, he sought no excuses for a hospitality he couldn't conceivably repay. Nor would he let the one-sidedness of the arrangement lessen his good appetite. To-night there was to be a conference of a political character which Slocomb wanted to attend, though confessing to Walt:

"I'm not in the inner circles, politically, any more than I am a member of the New Orleans aristocracy, socially. Still, the planters haven't all the money of the South and they know it; moreover, they can be friendly without condescension. Stay by me; you may see a high light or two and you won't spoil any real secrets because they won't be spilled in our presence."

"Celebres?" laughed Walt. "I am tolerably used to them; don't stammer or swallow my Adam's-apple in their presence. Perhaps because my first meeting with one took place at an early age. I was five, and was one of a group of children who turned out to see the corner-stone laid for

a free public library in Brooklyn. The dignitary who was to lay the stone, helping some of the children to safe spots, picked me up, held me for a moment to his breast and kissed me. He was General Lafayette."

"I hereby back out of the contest. I can't promise you any one of much more than local importance, I guess. No national figure, like Calhoun or our wrinkled old Zach. Hard to think of Zach as President, if he should get elected."

"I've met Poe. Cordial, in a quiet way, dressed well but appeared subdued, perhaps a little jaded. When I was thirteen or fourteen—I remember 'twas a sharp, bright January day—I saw on Broadway, just below Houston street, a very old man, bent, feeble, stoutish, bearded; swathed in rich furs, with a great ermine cap on his head, almost carried down the steps of his high front stoop and tucked in a gorgeous sleigh. John Jacob Astor. Then, other times, also on Broadway I recollect Andy Jackson with his upstanding hair, not roached but like a heavy mane. Clay, Webster, Martin Van Buren though he hasn't the look of a celebre in the least. Had a glimpse of Dickens while he was in New York. William Cullen Bryant I feel I know—always very kind and sociable, despite what people who don't know him will say. I was interested to meet a man who comes from down this way and has settled in uppermost Manhattan, bought an estate there; a man of most winning manner and safely successful, I judge, after many years of struggle. We met only the once, casually, but I'll always remember that conversation; he was interested in, was an authority on, birds—wonderfully observant and curious about outdoor life as I've always been."

"What was his name?"

"Audubon—wasn't that it?"

"Not J. J. Audubon?"

"That's the man! I remember now. John James Audubon. Has done a book of marvelous drawings, published some years ago, I think in England, studies of American birds—*Birds of America* was the title."

"By whiskey! To think of J. J. Audubon coming out on top after all these years! He must be close to seventy. Why, between twenty and thirty years ago, when I was a youngster, he gave me my dancing and fencing lessons! Anything to make a living, for him, those days. He had a good property, I believe, inherited from his father, French naval officer who had estates in Santo Domingo. J. J. lost it all in business ventures though he never made any bones about admitting it was his own fault. He'd quit work any hour of any day to go hunting or fishing or just tramping outdoors. . . . Well, I'm glad the old fellow has struck it rich."

"Don't know but what I'm somewhat like him," Walt said reflectively. He shrugged. "Perhaps"—in a low, unexpectedly serious tone—"I'll strike it rich, too, some direction or other, yet."

"Plenty of time," offered Slocomb with lightness. "You're not yet quite twenty-nine, and Audubon was forty or over when he cultivated my wrists and ankles."

They rose from the table, moving into a lounging room where the first person Walt saw was José O'Donoju. O'Donoju and Slocomb, meeting for the first time, shook hands. The Irishman said:

“I’ve been meanin’ to look ye up, Whitman *amigo*, but me hands have been full with affairs of honor.”

Walt didn’t catch the import, but Slocomb said at once:

“Whom have you been dueling with? Are you hurt?”

“Not a drop of Irish blood has been shed,” proclaimed the warrior. “On the other hand, or hands, as the case is, some excellint though faintly tainted French fluid has been added to the large amount saturatin’ Louisiana soil. Or perhaps our friend Raoul has only parted with the drop of black in him.”

“Dumouriez! You haven’t been—?”

“I have. Not wanst, but twice. Dissatisfied with losin’ only about a half-pint, he sent a subsequent challenge.”

“But what—?” began Walt innocently enough. Slocomb intervened, saying:

“No, no! Mr. Whitman doesn’t understand. The code is that if a gentleman tells you he has been engaged, you may ask him: With whom? if he is hurt?—anything of that sort. It isn’t permissible to ask anything about events leading up to—”

“Very correct, Mr. Slocomb.” O’Donoju executed a little bow, from the waist. “Howiver, it happens that I am free to speak of the second encounter. The hostile Dumouriez, having run his lift hand against the point of my rapier, a most beautiful piece of Toledo, I do assure you, was forced to borrow a handkerchief to stanch the flow. Mine was asked for. Unfortunately, at that juncture, I was compelled to use it myself before surrinderin’ it to his second; and at this gross insult he challenged me for the following morning.”

“Oh, ho-ho-ho!” Slocomb and Walt were helpless with laughter. The duelist, with twitching lips nevertheless insisted:

“You’ll not be after misunderstandin’, I hope. The O’Donoju intended no insult to his late adversary’s honor, but was, by the advint of circumstances not culminatin’ in a sneeze, absolutely *compilled* to resort to the pocket-cloth and blow his nose instantly!”

“Lord, this is lovely. All New Orleans will be laughing at Dumouriez,” declared Slocomb, with difficulty recovering his aplomb.

“The following mornin’,” finished O’Donoju, “Raoul the Ruffled carelessly brought his right hand against my useful weapon. Until he has had time to perfect himself in the art of pulling a trigger with his big toe, his opponent expects to be at liberty. Have you dined? Yes? I am sorry. *Au revoir*, then, gentlemen.”

“What a miracle, that man!” exclaimed Walt to Slocomb. “He fights a duel—rather a couple of duels—and then jests about it. The way to live, eh? Fulfil the code the world demands, but don’t make the mistake of taking the code seriously!”

“What a miracle as a swordsman, you’d better pronounce!” was the answer. “Dumouriez is the best in New Orleans, probably the best in the South. *And* ambidextrous—equally good with either hand. He must have been quite at O’Donoju’s mercy and your friend simply played to disable him. Wonderful!”

“But the original cause—?”

“Undoubtedly involved, near or remotely, a woman.

That's why one may not inquire. You noticed he said nothing about *that*."

They joined a group of a dozen or fifteen men sitting and standing in an irregular circle. An unannounced but understood formality seemed to govern the little assembly. First one, then another spoke; the rest listened attentively; after any individual utterance a low buzz of interchanged comment prevailed for several minutes. At the sound of a new voice these murmurs would stop and the group would give him audience. Slocomb, whispering, indicated to Walt a man whose face, strongly-featured but withal kind, Walt felt to be attractive unless it were for an excess of self-confidence.

"Davis—Jefferson Davis of Mississippi."

"Believes in the conquest of Mexico, doesn't he?"

"Oh, we all do."

"This man over this side, standing; very keen-looking, looks smart; smiling."

"He's partly Jewish, a brilliant lawyer. Benjamin's his name. Member of Slidell's firm. Made a great argument in the *Creole* ship case. Judah P. Benjamin." After a moment's further study, Slocomb added:

"Fellow sitting next to Davis is the new Senator from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas. He has Southern connections, embraces our point of view generally and should be a powerful ally."

Walt and his companion listened to the talk. Benjamin, taking the floor, was arguing for a quiet confidence in "our future." Why, after all, worry because of Van Buren? or

this preposterous Free Soil party? or a possible Whig victory this year?

“Gentlemen, look ahead. Has the North our wealth? Has it our secure social structure? Has it an educated ruling class? Has it a philosophy, political or otherwise? Has it our economic adjustment, actual or potential? Who would answer ‘Yes’ to any of these questions? The only industrial system at the North is a chaos from which emerges nothing but the greedy, systematic exploitation of white labor—*white*, mind you—by individual cunning. The prosperity of the North is at the mercy of mere trade, trafficking; retail shopkeepers and commission agents. The real production of wealth is here in our South. Has the North any single controlling commodity, like cotton? Of course, it hasn’t. And the North knows it. Our ultimate development may be retarded but it cannot be prevented, for the final guarantees of national prosperity are in our hands. . . .”

He spoke persuasively, and his detached, semi-legal, dispassionate review made a clear impression. Stephen Douglas followed, regretting that the Oregon boundary should have been compromised, scowling once or twice as he talked. Walt was struck by the way in which the scowl transformed his face from something pleasant into a countenance dangerously sinister. Last the sitting Davis discoursed briefly.

“The destiny,” he asserted, “is a non-political empire, the first of its kind. Mr. Benjamin has drawn suggestively the outlines. In the domain of politics, we inherit that

powerful safeguard, the doctrine or principle of the rights of the individual States. In every other respect our aspiration, wholly legitimate, must be imperial. Our real foundation is not, as our enemies pronounce, slavery with a superimposed aristocracy of the whites, but the production of economic wealth directly and increasingly from the very soil itself, an enterprise constantly enlarging in which all classes of our society are vitally concerned and in which the largest, the overwhelming number, of our population are immediately engaged. We scarcely realize our own felicity and fortune. Everything that constitutes the South to-day springs from the ground we plant, and continue to plant. No State in the history of mankind has been so homogeneous, so singularly unified, or, being so, has been so clearly conscious of its structure and its purposes."

A steady voice from the listening group added:

"Or so prepared to carry them out!"

The arising murmur, animated and applausive, died down at the sound of yet another voice. The speaker, apparently a planter who had been passing through the room and paused merely to deliver a piece of news meant for general distribution, said:

"Gentlemen, some travelers overland have just brought a report of rich gold deposits in California. Discovered in January. At a place called Sutter's Mill, I believe. They say a rush locally had begun before they left. Great excitement. I thought you'd like to know. . . ."

He passed on. In the momentary silence some one asked:

"If there's really gold, the Territory is liable to be filled

up with grabbing Yankees, isn't it? We need California!"

No one seemed ready with an answer.

7

In hours away from her Walt endeavored to define for his own reassurance his relations with Floride Dumouriez but the rapid current of his awakened emotion made the feat impossible. Such definition, it occurred to him, was like the task of building a bridge over a stream too wide to be arched by a single span—too turbulent, also, for the sinking of the necessary piers. An anchorage in that river of treacherous rages was not achievable. He loved her, yet was repelled by her; he felt certain that what she felt toward him was neither clearly love nor hate though always and unmistakably passion.

The romantic-illicit circumstances of their first meeting had plainly somewhat to do with this. For it *was* romantic to have felt her eyes mysteriously dwelling upon him and to have suffered, as he knew he had suffered, that curious though not disagreeable invasion of her will. Her will which, taking possession of him, had ordered him to take no immediate notice of her vicinity; so that he had walked on and by the house, had crossed the street some distance above, had strolled back and, with a reasonable air of mental pre-occupation, had entered the *foyer* as if its dark invitation were for him alone.

In truth, he had reason to believe it was; for the heiress of the Antoinés and wife of Raoul Dumouriez felt toward her husband no passion whatever, nothing but a cold hate.

This was visible although she never made the slightest reference to his existence. Walt could not but admire the presence in her character of something implacable as well as something unappeased, perhaps never to be appeased. On entering that mansion he saw, at no time, a single servant. What Mme. Dumouriez did with them he hadn't the slightest idea, for such an establishment as her husband's required dozens. He saw no one but Floride. Though, except servants, who was there to see? It was obvious that her husband was away from home most of the time—no doubt he dwelt exclusively with that placée who postdated his wife and whose elevation into favor had scandalized all her cousins. These cousins, or second cousins, for they were not nearly related, were all she had, she had once informed Walt, except for a ten-year-old brother who had been sent, after the death of her father and mother, to school in Charleston. She spoke of Hippolyte—that was his name—with a tenderness Walt found surprising; he thought her eyes filled; but a moment later she said, with her customary coldness:

“I would not have Hippolyte in this house.”

In this house where, unless it were for the vanishing servants, she was so much alone, Walt had with her long, exquisite hours. Arriving at the set time—for her last word to him was ever a specific instruction as to when he was next expected—he would enter the dim, roofed *foyer* and feel, as he turned toward the staircase, her little hand laid delightfully on his arm, just like that unforgettable first encounter. Reënacting the scene, he would carry it further with his whisper: “You wish—?” But now she would

answer with a low command: "Kiss me!" The scent of jasmine would be in his nostrils. . . .

The emotion she aroused in him, as he clasped her in his arms, was a feeling of something intoxicatingly lovely and ineffably sad. That was the distilled quality of what she was able to stir in him; it was real, like the fragrance of jasmine; if it was also evanescent, surely the waning of the spell she exerted left in him a definite sense of loss, of spiritual bereavement. For the spell was spiritual and this, or the sense of this, was what distinguished their encounters from every ordinary sort of intrigue. Without the genuine pathos he felt existent in their relation, that relation would have been no better, if no worse, than a dozen similar affairs in the last few years, affairs perhaps less romantic in their inception but all alike in their inevitable outcome. Such affairs were agreeable, exciting episodes but neither party to them misunderstood their underlying commonplace, which was the strictly prosaic thing called physical attraction. Sex! A simple function disguised as a series of accidents to retain the invaluable element of surprise. But Floride was quite apart from all that.

Apart and unshakeably above; and her instant bestowal of all which those others made their ultimate surrender was the best, the indisputable proof of her aloofness, her magnificent superiority. Put in words her attitude, from the very first, would have been: "I can give, without effort or hesitation, what other women bargain for as their final treasure. Take me. . . . You see? that costs me nothing. I am incredibly rich. You don't know how rich I am, I who have had none to give to. . . ." Yes, he could hear her saying

something very like that in that low, distinct, slightly husky throated-music which was her voice.

Floride! . . . But she had the beauty of magnolia blossoms; their generosity as well. . . .

If at times she repelled him he understood, in his heart, that it must be his recognition of the fact that he could never make her completely happy. He tried to solve the mystery of this but could, as yet, only get as far as: If she were less Floride, of the Antoines! If I were less Walt Whitman! In the profound dissonance which made the combined chord of their two personalities each discovered, sometimes apart, sometimes together, an inner satisfaction impossible to explain. Was *that* sex? What complex function thus disguised itself, retaining the invaluable element of surprise?

But always her evident passion gave the tension and the pitch. At all moments, with her, away from her, Walt felt the unvarying vibration in which her conception of him had been formed; was and would be sustained. It were better to be hated by such a woman, he told himself with sincerest conviction, than to be loved unimaginatively by one less fine. Had you, of flesh and red blood and nerves and lighted reason, rather be hated than be loved? Yes! Floride, Floride! . . . it is because you know you have not utter hold of me. For I will certainly elude you, even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me—behold!—already, you see, I have escaped from you.

. . . No! It wasn't meant! Floride! Floride!

8

From time to time young Traubel drifted into Walt's office and the two of them sat and talked or else went on sight-seeing strolls together along the levees, through the streets or over to Lake Pontchartrain to view the fine sunsets. Occasionally they went to Mlle. Fleurus's where the enjoyment was always multiplied, rather than just added to, by every newcomer who could talk on any subject whatsoever.

The revolutionaire was by no means cut off from his countrymen, of whom New Orleans had long contained a respectable number. These were of all kinds, from several families whose ancestry matched that of the best French and Spanish blood in the city to small shopkeepers and even free negroes of whom it was impossible to say much except that they bore German surnames. Concerning these last Walt expressed one day curiosity which Traubel was able to satisfy.

"German peasants were brought here in the land speculation you call the Mississippi Bubble. Most of them died. But when, in 1764, the Acadians were exiled from Nova Scotia, they were sent first to Haiti and then, unable to stand that climate, were transferred to Louisiana. About the same time a few thousand Germans founded in Haiti a state called Bombardopolis and some of them, for the same reason, the climate, came here with the Acadians."

"What a *mélange!*"

"No, racial intermixture has been going on since the world began. If the revolution succeeds in Germany as it has just succeeded in France, if we get a republic or guar-

antees of political liberty, my country will become a State as great as any in the world. But if we fail—!”

“Then? Then?”

“The best of Germany will pour into America for some years to come. At home, what? I wonder! Perhaps Prussia will rule, with an idea, as South Carolina seems to sway this South. Why are political ideas always imperial in their tendency?”

“The idea of these States isn’t imperial, it’s democratic.”

“I might point to Texas, but I’ll only observe, instead, that the only difference between the imperialism of empire and the imperialism of democracy seems to be the difference of conscious and unconscious tendency. Where the emperor conquers for selfish reasons, the democrat insists on sharing the blessings of democracy; both expand themselves.”

“That’s growth.”

“You mean it’s inevitable. I suppose so. But I think the process might be helped by candor.” Traubel laughed at an occurring example. “Imagine, Mr. Whitman,” he requested, “England announcing, as she annexes some forlorn region at the ends of the earth, ‘Excuse me, but I’ve got to grow!’”

“And the blending of races that we see going on here? What do you suppose will be the result? A new species? and a better?”

“I won’t guess. Science is just beginning to examine the facts with plants and animals. The English scientist, Darwin, seems to be leading us to the brink of great discoveries. Have you been interested by the mixtures of white and black

here in New Orleans? I have, and by the precise way the French people classify them."

"Slocomb just touched on it one day. I wish he'd told me more."

"I keep a notebook; try to train myself in scientific method. It is full of cases I've heard about and I try to discard the superstitions and exaggerations. There's so much of both, I find conclusions hard. But the few I can reach are wholly—*ach!* what is the English word? not 'disappointing' exactly. *Ja!* I have it—non-committal."

"But Slocomb told me of a man, Raoul Dumouriez, who's what is called a sang-mele—one-sixty-fourth negro blood. That may mean, probably does, that he's the sixth generation from a white-black union, with only white blood infused for certainly over a hundred years. Slocomb admitted Dumouriez can't be told from a pure white. Has a devilish temper but that's not peculiar to any race."

"The child of a white and a negro is always recognizably a negro. My notes convince me of that. In the second and later generations nothing can be predicted, nothing at all. The individual may appear to be entirely white blood, or mixed blood, or black. He may have a light skin and hair that is tufted, or a black skin and blue eyes, or be black and have perfectly straight hair, or be completely like a white except for the negro body odor, or any other combination whatever."

"But suppose the black blood becomes negligible?"

"Scientifically, it can never become negligible. Nor could a drop of white blood in an ocean of black. A hybrid is a hybrid; unstable; the drop may show itself any time."

“Well, but *practically*—”

“What is that word, ‘practically’? However, I know what you would ask. I find that generally one-eighth negro blood or white blood—a black or white great-grandparent—is enough to make a perceptible difference; but very often one-sixteenth is noticeable and sometimes even less.”

Walt stood still—they had left the office of the *Crescent* and were on an aimless ramble. Visibly staggered, he inquired:

“Then to absorb the black generally—obliterate, with few and diminishing exceptions the negro physical characteristics—would be impossible? To reduce the black blood to at least one-thirty-second would take five generations—”

“In which those with black blood, or lessened black blood, must be married exclusively with pure whites. Are you a mathematician?”

“No-no! My two-and-two generally make five.”

“In racial mathematics, one-and-one generally make five, *mein Freund* Whitman! The average family has three children. Now, just for exercise of something besides our legs, I will do a little figuring. The best estimate I can get is that there are now in this country 3,500,000 negroes. Of these less than 500,000 have some white blood, but we will not reckon on that except to help us along. We will say there are 3,500,000 blacks. *Sehr gut!* Perhaps 2,000,000 are marriageable or will become so. They must be married to 2,000,000 pure whites. Result: 6,000,000 mulattoes. These must be married to 6,000,000 pure whites. Result: 18,000,000 quadroons. These must be married to 18,000,000 pure whites. Result: 54,000,000 metifs. Marry these

to 54,000,000 whites and we might have 162,000,000 meameloucs. Marry these to 162,000,000 whites and look for 486,000,000 quarterons, each of whom will have one-thirty-second negro blood. The next generation, if children of whites and quarterons, would be sang-meles—let me see, *ja!* 1,458,000,000 Raoul Dumouriezs.”

“Must be a gross mistake somewhere. Not all would marry; many would die young.”

“True enough. The proportion is the thing. With all possible corrections, that would stay the same.”

“Africa will have to remain the Dark Continent—dark-skinned, anyway! ”

“Physical characteristics are one thing, traits of mind are another,” suggested the studious young German. “Our century knows nothing about it, and probably the next will not. While in the North I read a book by a fugitive slave, named Frederick Douglass. I was told he was pure black. He wrote with much ability. Have you read anything by the Frenchman, Alexandre Dumas? ”

“No.”

“He does plays, stories. I think they are as good at least as the English Walter Scott’s. But I learned here the other day that Dumas’s grandmother was a Santo Domingo negress. So he has, maybe, one-eighth black blood.”

“After all,” commented Walt, with a touch of speculative enthusiasm, “great, positive characters may arise, assert themselves! Such natural persons, superiorly endowed, count out of all proportion to their number in any race, or any generation. Isn’t that so? But you spoke of Scott. Every one here in the South seems to read him, though

chiefly his novels, stories, which I care least about. Am no hand to read novels, anyway. Scott's poetry has been my inexhaustible source of rich, varied pleasure. About my sixteenth year, I guess, I got hold of a stout volume, octavo of a thousand pages with jungles of footnotes; I have it and read it yet—the Border minstrelsy, 'Marmion,' 'Lady of the Lake,' 'Rokeby,' all the dramas, essays on poetry, on romance—oh, a perpetual feast! Byron I have much loved, but seem to care less for."

Traubel looked at his companion keenly, met the clear, gray-blue eye, and was struck by its lucid serenity. He asked:

"Tell me, Whitman *mein Freund*, what is it you would most like to do, to become?"

His pale-looking face of a German student and intellectual was extremely earnest; eye to eye Walt received the question and appeared to digest it for some minutes. Standing together on the peopled levee, they seemed to themselves completely isolated; and a curious tension was established. . . . At length Walt exclaimed:

"Why ask me that? Do you want me to confess I don't know? I've thought of so many things; they don't fit. Or I don't fit *them*. Ever since I was a youngster I've scribbled, written. Trash, trash! I've tried to write verse. It's worthless; isn't even third-rate verse. I've talked, lectured. That wa'n't any good, either. Sometimes I think there ain't *anything*; but as soon as I quit thinking, go outdoors, see people, sights, and mingle with persons I begin to live again; feel redblooded, inexpressibly excited, eager; have the strong sense that I am meant for all this and that something good,

something positive will yet come out of it all, be expressed by me or through me, it doesn't matter which. Maybe in action; maybe in both words and action blending. Which, which? And when? How long must I wait—watch, absorb, steep, ripen? ”

“ In Europe, at this hour, you would live in action! ”

“ Europe? No! I'm American. What I feel, what I want to live, express, is peculiarly American.”

“ I'm not sure there is, as yet, anything peculiarly American! ”

“ There is! I know, feel, there is. You and all Europeans, skilled observers like Dickens among you, come here and don't perceive it; why? Because it is yet undistilled; but it shall be distilled! Oh, call it my insufferable conceit, if you will; but I shall yet help to distil it! ”

9

The life of words—worse! the life of mere meditated words, plumed thoughts, and reverie arising in the midst of, and out of observation—as against the pressed claims of the life of action . . .

Shortly after the talk with Traubel, Walt and the young German were again at the Maison Fleurus as callers or rather, perhaps, as persons transiently uppermost in Mlle. Jeanne's constantly rotating *cercle*. Indeed, that was Jeanne's own expressed conception of their presence this afternoon.

“ My *cercle* revolves not giddily, like a roulette wheel; on the other hand, it comes never to a standstill,” she de-

clared, smiling. "Then, *aussi*, it has more chances in its circumference. I never lose."

"Would I could say as much!" uttered José O'Donoju, with an air of classic declamation. "I never win!"

"You cannot expect to win wars and money both," rebuked Jeanne.

"I've lost me money. If I lose the War of Liberation—"

"How do you expect to win a war in South America when you stay here in Nouvelle Orleans, *muy* José?"

"I'm here to get funds for the cause. Or am I? The *buenos* Colorados say I am; so do I. Your illustrious *pere* says I am here to be hired as a filibustero in Cuba; I say not. I say also I am here to become his son-in-law; he says not. You say—"

"It is evident, my dear friend, that the deciding vote rests with me. I determine your destiny in all directions. Be patient, your fate is in wise hands." Unusual sounds of indignant disapproval, coming from Madame Fleurus, terminated this chaffing. The South American general turned to conciliate Jeanne's aunt. Jeanne began to talk with Walt and Traubel, first introducing a man of winning appearance and manner who sat very quietly for one of that group. He struck Walt as being a few years older than himself—thirty-five, possibly.

"M'sieu' Whitman, M'sieu' Trouble, this is Eugene Fuller of Nouvelle Orleans, but a native of the North, like you, M'sieu' Whitman. Of Massachusetts."

Walt asked at once:

"Are you related to Margaret Fuller?"

"She is my sister." Eugene Fuller was surprised; pleased

yet somehow disconcerted. I've flustered him, thought Walt, and, besides, he feels hardly at ease among the lot of us. But I like his looks and I guess I want to get to know him. . . .

With a perceptible effort to be civil, Eugene Fuller asked:

"Do you know my sister?"

"I met her once, casually, years ago." The words seemed to revive in Walt's mind with extraordinary clearness an evening spent in a Long Island parlor back in, let's see, in 1840? Yes. 1840, Fifth Month. . . . Aloud he continued:

"'Twas at the Mulfords', in Babylon. She was passing through, just staying over night; I likewise. We had a long, fine talk after supper. Strangely enough, though later she came to work in New York, on the *Tribune* under Horace Greeley and I was constantly in New York myself those days, we never saw each other at that time. I saw, could as I thought constantly detect her writing. New York has a peculiar property of bringing folks side by side and never letting them meet."

"How I should dislike that city!" declared Mlle. Fleurus. "What is the Yankee proverb? yes! it is a haystack and all of the inhabitants are needles. Paris is quicksilver, always running together and spilling apart. Charleston is a rich cake in careful layers. Richmond is like a pair of embroidered, easy old slippers. How I loved Richmond! But then, perhaps it was mostly M'sieu' Edgar Poe."

"You knew Poe?" asked Traubel.

"Who did not? He was our girlish hero. Once he spoke to us, the young ladies of the seminary; but afterward he

became scandalous and we were instructed that, as a person, he had ceased to exist. Oh, how funny it was!" Jeanne laughed unrestrainedly. "But as if that did not make him only the more fascinating! You can imagine, doubtless, how for us *jeunes filles* no poet could exist without an interest in his person of the liveliest! Byron, *par exemple!* Was he wicked? We spent hours regenerating him in our secret hearts. It is not appreciated, *mes amis*, the good such men do by stimulating the purest and most virtuous—truly unselfish—emotions in the feminine bosom!" For all her banter, thought Walt, she more than half means it.

"Poe interests Europe outside of England. So far, he is your only American writer who does." Traubel was talking. "The young girl here as everywhere may be anthropo-poetic, but European readers and critics are not."

"M'sieu' Trouble! What is that name you call us?"

"Anthropo-poetic? That would mean to insist on seeing the person behind the poet, or the poem."

"*C'est barbare!*"

"*Es ist ja nicht!* Nothing of the sort! It is good Greek. A well-built word; one excellent thing about our German tongue is that it permits, even encourages, such word-building, as did Greek."

"Why not such word-building in English?" asked Walt, interested.

Traubel threw up his hands.

"*Ach*, English! The universal solvent. It takes all tongues and gives their words its own silver-plating, or decomposes them for its use, or forms a precipitate with them

or produces new, beautiful crystals of speech. What a language!

"The language of Poe," said mischievously Jeanne Fleurus.

"Is it?" demanded Walt. "I want to be fair, just. But does Poe, in his poetry, use English? Seems to me he rings carillons. Like perpetual chimes of music bells, ringing from lower *b* flat up to *g*. Yet, within their limited range of melody, I see them to be melodious, beautiful expressions, doubtless unexcelled expressions, of certain pronounced phases of human morbidity." He turned, tolerantly gesturing, to Traubel. "The poetic area is very spacious; has room for all; has so many mansions! But with what he says in *The Poetic Principle* I find myself in fullest agreement; I mean his dictum that, at any rate for our day, our occasions, there can be no such thing as a long poem—no *Iliad*, no *Paradise Lost*. The same thought has haunted me but Poe's argument, short as it is, works out the sum, proves it, satisfies me."

"What is this? Are you a poet, M'sieu' Whitman?" Jeanne, listening, had subjected Walt to a sharp scrutiny in which, perhaps, purely feminine perception reinforced objective vision. Walt laughed.

"Phrenologist says not," he assured her, with practised concealment that amused the impassive Traubel. "I have been examined, topographized, bumps on my head carefully charted. Nelson Fowler was very leisurely about it, made an elaborate examination at the Phrenological Cabinet of Fowler & Wells, Nassau Street near Beekman, New York.

I have, in a mixture I can't remember, voluptuousness, inhabitiveness, combativeness, conscientiousness, alimentiveness, intuitiveness, copious friendship, some sublimity, firmness, self-esteem, individuality, and the faculties of form, locality, eventuality and comparison—a few elude me."

"And you are a born tactician," said Traubel, his eye meeting Walt's. Walt returned the glance calmly; his *divertissement* had been successful and Jeanne was now exchanging remarks across the room with O'Donoju.

Traubel, turning to Eugene Fuller, was asking about the Brook Farm experiment. Fuller explained:

"I know little about it. I had left New England some years before, in '35, to act as tutor on the Storrow plantation in Virginia. My sister wasn't a member of the Brook Farm community, only a visitor, though people will have it that she lived there. That is wrong."

"I lament having come to America too late to visit Brook Farm. That would have rounded out importantly my study of such experiments," Traubel declared. "For a country so young, America has many such."

"What do you mean?" Walt added. "Of course, there are the Mormons. And we've all heard of seven-and-seventy sects, reforms, what-not in the last half-dozen years. But I thought it had mostly died down."

"I have in mind particularly the experiments of my countrymen," was Traubel's answer. "Odd, small religious sects like the Labardists who came to Delaware in a handful in 1684 and the Pietists who settled near Germantown ten years later. Both those colonies soon perished, but the Dunkards have done better with their so-called cloister of

Ephrata. The Moravians, at Bethlehem, tried communistic living; it did not work well but Bethlehem thrives as a town. But the newer ventures are more interesting. I have visited the place called Economy, about twenty miles from Pittsburgh, which is the third home in this country of Father Rapp's Harmony sect. That is a settlement of great beauty with simple, well-proportioned buildings and many vines and flowers, including a floral labyrinth. Those people are rich, for on some of their land is coal and they have good mills and looms and make good wines. Perhaps, now that the good Father Rapp has just died, they will not do so well."

"But what do such folks believe?"

"Oh, no use of tobacco, celibacy; some allow music, some do not. It is a mixture of religious ideas and communism; apparently neither set of ideas has hold enough alone. Well, you can see! Communism is purely intellectual, and these are, or were, little-educated people, peasants mostly. It needs the emotional, the religious appeal. There is also a community called Zoar, in your State of Ohio, and the sect of the Inspirationists have just abandoned five villages with mills, shops and schools to settle in Iowa at a place they call Amana. Christian Metz, the leader at Amana, is strong and able. That should last awhile, though all amusement, even music, is forbidden; celibacy is encouraged but not insisted on."

"Sixty-odd young Frenchmen have just passed through here on their way to found a similar colony," said Eugene Fuller. "Disciples of Étienne Cabet, I believe."

"*Ach*, yes! He wrote about 'Icaria,' an ideal society

like"—Traubel explained to Walt—"the English Sir Thomas More's 'Utopia.'"

"It's a shame," Eugene Fuller insisted. "Those youngsters will get the fever in the swamps of some Louisiana parish or else they'll go loco on the Texas plains. There ought to be some way to stop them."

"A free country! Besides, Mr. Fuller," Traubel added simply, "who can protect men from themselves? Surely no government, for a government cannot even protect itself from ideas!"

Soon after the *cercle* broke up. Walt, taking leave of Jeanne, was at pains also to say farewell to O'Donoju and Traubel, for he wanted to talk further with Eugene Fuller, to whom, as they approached Canal Street, he said with emphasis:

"I count meeting you here to-day a piece of the best, the luckiest good fortune! Although I never saw your sister in New York, I much admired her writings and I have never forgotten the light she shed, the help she gave, searching insights from her observation, reading, experience, in our talk 'way back, eight years ago very nearly. She had, has, a powerful, 'cute mind. Do tell me what you hear of her! She left the *Tribune*, I know; went abroad a year—or was it longer?—ago. Must be longer."

"Yes, it approaches two years. She sailed in August, 1846. She visited England, Scotland, Paris, Rome. Last summer she was in Switzerland, returning last October to Rome. It—it has been the fulfilment of her lifelong dream."

A hesitation, or uncertainty, due to some unexplained emotion, struck Walt's ear at once, seemed to give the cue

to something in his own nature, frequently touched, never unresponsive. Eugene Fuller had a presence, a personality, actually more attractive and winning than that of his sister. Walt felt it, and perhaps the brother of Margaret Fuller felt also something unordinary, something even provoking to intimacy, in the frank-faced, bearded younger man walking beside him. He said tentatively:

“Margaret was always strikingly outspoken, in conversation.”

“Oh, she did much for me at a critical moment! A deep, beautiful, but intensely painful experience lay just ahead of me; she could not avert it from me, wouldn't have wanted to, nor would I have wanted her to. Nor, perhaps, make it easier in the undergoing; but *afterward* her words, remembered, frequently pondered, were a great comfort, solace, to me!”

“Thank you for that!” Eugene Fuller spoke warmly. “I have sometimes thought, hearing so many things said, so many criticisms, that Margaret had scarcely any true friends. And our separation made the fact of her friendships seem less real, I suppose, than the certainty of her enemies.”

“Give me her address, do! and I will write to her. I should have done so before; but for a long, long while any thought of thanking her brought up something so painful I had to thrust it all back, back in my recollection. I suppose, truthfully examined, I'd find that to be the real reason I never made the effort to look her up, acknowledge her help, in New York. But I'll write to her now in Rome, yes!”

Eugene Fuller flushed, looked dismayed. As he halted on the sidewalk in visible perplexity and irresolution Walt exclaimed:

“Have I said anything wrong? I’ll unsay it, then. I meant only well—”

“No, that is all right! I—I was wondering if I could show you something in confidence? It contains a secret . . . I have really no right to show it to any one . . . but you have spoken so finely of Margaret, I think, perhaps, if you will promise not to speak of it—”

“I will most certainly not speak of it. You’ve my promise! But, wait! Do as you feel. Take time, if you wish, to deliberate a little.”

“No,” Eugene Fuller answered convincingly. “I am certain it is right to show it to you. You—you have been frank. It is a letter from Margaret. I think, since although you saw her some years ago, you really and rightly feel you know her intimately, it is better you should read it than that I should try to give you the substance, which I couldn’t do without being unfair to her. I mean, it would not sound right or reasonable in any other telling than her own. I have it in my pocket. Will you come to the Club with me? Do; and you shall take your time over it and afterward we will have dinner together.”

10

“Dearest Eugene,” ran Margaret’s letter, dated from Rome, a month earlier, “have you wondered at not hearing oftener from me? Then, when you have read this letter, perhaps your wonder will be less. For at last, Brother, I

have emerged from the life of thought and dreams and patient (not always patient!) *waiting* into the life of action. I have, in modest seeming, that wish you once heard me express: To be a Pericles rather than an Anaxagoras, to translate myself and not anybody else however heavenly-gifted. True, the great Goethe says: 'Thought expands, but lames; action animates, but narrows.' Yet with all his immensity, you know I have never gone to Goethe as a guide or friend, but as a great thinker who made me think. Now, in my thirty-eighth year, I hope I have done my thinking to some effectual purpose; if not, surely, in the posture of my present affairs, it is too late. Is it? I am confident not. And I have this to say further: Judge me, let all who know judge me, not by the thirty-seven years that are gone, the slow preparation, the aching study and continuous anxiety, the dawdling, the tried expedients, the continually-deferred wish—all that! It is over with, sunk, lost, submerged; hold it no more against me than the years of a child at school in appraising the produced work of a graduated, emergent man.

"For how many years have I not thought of myself as destined for the rôle, exquisite but unsuitable, of renunciation. Once in my early life, as I think you know, there came to me a deep experience of emotion in relation to another, followed by profound disappointment. After that it used to be that I would say to myself that I had no home on the earth. In the pain of this acknowledgment there was yet the consolation of an image ever-present of a home that would have a degree of beautiful harmony with my inward life. Driven from home to home as a Renouncer, I seemed

to myself to absorb the picture and the poetry of each. Keys of gold, silver, iron and lead accumulated in my casket.

“No one loved me; but I loved many a good deal; and the varied calls on my sympathy were such as to make me hope not to be made partial, cold or ignorant in my isolation. I had no child, and the woman in me has so craved this experience that it has seemed the want of it must paralyze me. That death in life has been spared me, as I now know; the cup has passed from my lips. In all reverence, in humility and ecstasy, I sing: ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.’ . . .

“For, dear Eugene, my brother, I am a wife; more, I have the promise of becoming a mother.

“Read on and you shall know all the circumstances that can be communicated in a letter; but before you read further, I charge you to keep this secret closely for the good reasons which will appear in what follows. I do not mean that you may not confide in any one whatsoever, but let it not be in more than one or two of those who know or have known me and let the justification for their choice be not formal but spiritual kinship. . . .

“In early spring now almost a year ago, as you know, I first reached Rome. It was soon after that arrival, while I was yet too thrilled with happiness to do much more than venture out in a golden haze, that I went one day with Mr. and Mrs. Spring to hear vespers at St. Peter’s. After the service I suggested we wander about separately as pleased us, viewing the chapels, etc., and meeting at an agreed place.

There, however, I failed to find them. While I was going about and looking for them among various groups a young and gentlemanly Italian who saw my visible uncertainty came up. He offered, as I could gather, to guide me. With my assent we looked for some while longer, the crowd gradually leaving. At length he tried to procure a carriage for me; none was to be had, and so we walked to my residence. There was an attempt at conversation, not very successful, for he knew no English and my spoken Italian is, or was then, rather, highly deficient. We parted at my door; I told the Springs of this little adventure.

“Not more than a day or two afterward I observed the same gentleman walking in front of the house, as if he contemplated calling. And a little later he did. . . . I must shorten these preliminaries, and will do so by simply saying that we met once or twice before I left Rome to visit the cities of the North and Switzerland. This is how I came to know the man who is now my husband, Giovanni Angelo, Marchese (Marquis) Ossoli.

“Last October I returned to Rome, taking an apartment in the Corso and highly resolving to live for six whole months on \$400. You who know what economies I have been used to will appreciate that this was not so hopeless an undertaking as, to many others, it must sound. Besides, was I not in better health than at any time since my childhood? Far better; for with the best intentions, Father nearly ruined my health as a child by his cramming and forcing methods of study, so that had I been a boy I had been qualified to enter Harvard College at eleven years. Now here in Rome I seemed to have reconquered good

health; the perpetual headaches were absent; and for happiness not even the best days of my previous life were comparable with these. Much was due to congenial acquaintances, of course, and to the surroundings, so packed with history and the memorials of other lives lived so richly, disastrously, with tragedy or with triumph—but *lived!* More, oh, how much, much more! was due to the renewal of my acquaintance with Ossoli. . . . In the unaffected way which alone was possible to my circumstances, I used to receive people on Monday evenings. To these small gatherings Giovanni invariably came. My Italian improving, we were able to talk freely and I found to my delight that his youth made him, despite his family and connections, sympathize with the republican cause. I, of course, had been a sympathizer with the advocates of Italian liberty and unity since my first arrival abroad and encounters in London with the noble and ardent Mazzini. It inspires me to believe that I was able, to an extent, to encourage Giovanni in his purpose of embracing the Cause and, even at the sacrifice of traditions and the risk of estrangement from his brothers, pledge himself to the party of the people.

“I ought to make it clear, I suppose, that while our friendship was thus maturing I was not, or at least knew not that I was coming to love him. Nor did it occur that he had such thought of me; for one thing he was so much younger than I, being but thirty.

“As winter drew on Giovanni’s father, the old Marchese, fell quite seriously ill and while he lingered in this condition the care of looking after him devolved chiefly upon Giovanni who was the youngest and the only unmarried child. For a

while we saw not much of each other except for a few minutes daily. One day shortly after his father's death Giovanni told me that he loved me and asked me to become his wife. 'I must marry you or be miserable,' were his words. I was dumbfounded; told him I must refuse to look upon him as a lover; told him that a marriage with me would be entirely unfitting and that it were best he should marry a younger woman. I valued, treasured, his friendship; I could not think myself suited to the rôle of his wife.

"With this the matter rested. Some weeks went by. Giovanni came as frequently as ever—nor would I have had him do otherwise, in the circumstances—but his manner became increasingly hopeless and even in some sort desperate and moody. He was so utterly unlike himself that all our acquaintances noticed the change and kept remarking to me on his paleness, his apparent dejection and obvious unhappiness. Of myself in the same time I can speak with less confidence, but I came to doubt whether I did not love him, after all, and, at length, to feel, to *know* that I did. . . . As for his affection, I couldn't remain unconvinced any longer. . . . To sum up, then, I had to be honest and concede him honest. We were married last December, secretly, and our marriage is now several months old.

"Why secretly? you will ask, and think such an act very unlike your sister Margaret. I cannot hope to make you feel with their full, justifying force the several good reasons. Giovanni's brothers are chamberlains in the Papal household and Giovanni has long been looked upon as a black sheep by the Ossolis and their kinsmen on account of his radical political ideas and sympathies. He has been conspicuous

for his adherence to Mazzini and is placed in a position sufficiently difficult by his captaincy in the Civic Guard. His marriage with a foreigner, requiring smoothing perhaps in ordinary conditions, might, at this juncture, if known, mean an abrupt break with his people in which no explanation would be listened to and out of which no reconciliation afterward could arise. To do Giovanni justice, he was quite willing to run this risk; but how could I, in my position, countenance his doing so? Should I not have acted with the most extraordinary selfishness and egotism? A wife older than her husband, of no physical attractiveness, an alien to his country and tongue without means or property of her own, to give satisfied assent to a step which might mean the immediate and hopeless sacrifice of everything, *everybody*, he has known? And this at a time when his native country is in a perplexed turmoil and needs the services of every one of her children given as their hearts direct! The republican cause, while we hope, work and pray, is far from success and may even go down to final defeat; in embracing that cause, in the event of its non-success, my husband may sacrifice not only his title (for which neither he nor I care at all) but all of the little property he has, or can hope to inherit—everything in the world, as most persons would account it. No! No! There are immediate difficulties and anxieties and distractions quite enough; Giovanni jeopardds enough and more than enough in our marriage and in his political action. Let us exercise what prudence and wholly defensible discretion we may in our troubled situation.

“It *is* troubled, and a fresh trouble, however blissfully

awaited, is that prospect which I revealed to you in the commencement of this letter. But for that we lay our plans as well as is possible; and with the approach of summer I shall leave Rome and go to a tiny village in the Abruzzi mountains, a hamlet called Rieti, where Giovanni will be able to join me from time to time and where I shall have the services of a trusted nurse, formerly in the employ of his family. Giovanni must principally remain here in Rome to discharge his duties with the *Guardia Civile* as well as to prevent the arousing of suspicion of our marriage. For, though I could not bring myself for his sake to consent to its being known, once the course of secrecy has been entered upon the necessity to preserve it becomes paramount to everything else. I pray that changed conditions may end that necessity speedily.

“Would you like to know Giovanni’s personal appearance? I wonder if I can describe it; probably not in any way that will lead to your satisfaction. He is thirty, as I have said, and goodlooking, quite handsome, I believe, in the general estimation apart from my own; he is tall and thin and there is a slightly melancholy expression about his eyes, or so I have heard it called, though to me it is merely pensive and winning. He is above all amiable and tender, not intellectual natively or to my own extent; simple, natural, *good!* That he has great personal courage, much spirit, zeal and patriotic devotion I feel and, in the fortunes so changing about us daily, the world may come to know. I enclose a lock of his hair, blue-black like that of so many of his countrymen; and only wish I could send you a picture to show you the delicate features and the expression I have

spoken of about the eyes. . . . He is full of the most constant and lover-like attentions, over and above, I should think, the habitual courtesy and attentiveness in which men of the highest European classes are bred. His education, while not extensive, is such as most Roman gentlemen receive; a priest has the care of them in childhood and acts as tutor. Giovanni has no foreign languages except for reading French a little; his chief interest among his studies, he tells me, was always Italian history. He has much reserve, listens rather than talks, and is not quickly interested in other people, so that most of the Americans here tend to think there is not much in him and find him rather dull. To be sure, only myself can know how lover-like he can be; nothing appears too trivial in the way of attentions to me; he is genuinely thoughtful and unselfish in a striking degree. And nothing, I think, shows this better than the fact that for some time before our marriage, realizing instinctively how limited were my means, he was always in the habit of making what Italians term little economies—suggestions or arrangements that would better suit my feeble old purse.

“ Oh, I am happy, Eugene, happy, happy, *happy!* ”

“ At present I am staying on the Piazza Barberini. This is formed by the convergence of three streets and is adorned with Bernini’s Triton blowing a conch. In a side street, behind, is the Villa Ludovisi and here, in the vanished centuries, lay the gardens of Sallust. The piazza takes its name from the Barberini palace, on one of the three streets meeting at the piazza; this particular street ascends the Quirinal crowned by the palace occupied usually by the Popes in

summer. All this is rather in the north and easterly part of Rome, you must know, and you are not to picture me living among ancient ruins; the Colosseum and ancient Rome in general occupy the southerly part of the city, though the Baths of Diocletian are in easy walking distance.

“ You will wonder anxiously, no doubt, what plans, if any, I have made in the event of anything untoward—war, civil commotion or merely a personal problem of some sort arising. In such a case I shall take Mrs. Story fully into my confidence, even to the extent of trusting her with my belongings including the certificate of my marriage. . . . But that is very unlikely to be necessary. I am so happy, so hopeful, I believe our fortunes *must* turn out well.

“ Why? I scarcely know unless it be that for me my marriage with a man who loves me, and whom I love, is the consummation of all toward which, as I now see it, my life has tended. That consummation, so long and so heart-breakingly delayed, might easily have come too late. I might have become dried up, dessicated and sealed against the deepest possibility of human emotion—at least, so it seems to me now; though perhaps in looking backward we invest with superfluous horror the fate we have eluded. You will understand, also, how strongly I am appealed to not by the possibly romantic elements preceding and entering into my marriage but by the circumstances in which I—Giovanni and I together—find ourselves placed. I mean the translation of deliberated plan (not mere impulse) into glorious and inspiring action in which we can and do join. For, fine as was the achievement of liberty in our New World, the reconquest of liberty here in the Old has a

double, nay a many-folded inspiration. It is not simply that a nation is to be born, but Italy, *Rome*, is to spring into new life!

“I wish I could say that other Americans here felt in any degree as I do, but I am afraid I cannot. In the main, they seem indifferent, or perhaps annoyed at the inconveniences to which the civil struggle inevitably subjects them. It is curious that people should so largely remain unable to look at a cause, like Italian unity, in the terms of the lofty principle by which it has been conceived. Or, when once they have done so, that they should lose the moral elevation of that insight in the dust of a struggle to execute its purpose. . . . Our littleness is not to be overcome in a few generations or centuries. ‘Action animates, but narrows.’ So be it; perhaps I, too, will become narrow; but act I must.

“And in action there is great solace, solace that is or will be needed by Giovanni and myself in the days immediately ahead. So much is uncertain, indefinite, barely probable! We do not know when we can make our marriage known with discretion; we do not know but that it may have to be made known in conditions that leave nothing to discretion or even to hope outside of our unaided selves. Should the worst befall, we can with fortune make our way to America; there I have some friends, there I can work and Giovanni will labor to establish himself, successfully I feel confident. But for the moment, or the hour, or the day we are comfortably and safely placed; do not worry yourself in the least about me (how can you when I tell you of my supreme happiness!) and should there be anything you can

do I will not hesitate to let you know. . . . Keep well and prosper at the South. Do you remember in our childhood how you and I were nearest companions? We were, of course, about of an age; but I think it was something shared in our natures that used to make us love to wander out together, across streams and through the woods, walking and talking or oftener silent—never other than happy. Those good days! Let the memory of them freshen your thoughts of me. . . . Guard well my dear secret, Eugene, for now I must close this too-long letter with the truest affection for you from Giovanni as well as from your sister,

“MARGARET FULLER OSSOLI.”

II

When he finished reading Margaret Fuller Ossoli's letter, tears had stood in Walt's eyes; and tears came to them afterward in hours when, remembering a Fifth Month evening in a quiet Long Island parlor, he remembered also the days and nights immediately following. Esther! . . . *L'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle.*

“The immortal great do not find their sublime fulfilment in sex.” And, not eight years afterward, from the same throat, the eternal song of preparing motherhood: “My soul doth magnify the Lord . . .”

He wondered, with a great ache of separation and loneliness, if Esther, also . . .

Useless! Useless! Have you not confronted all that, Walt, and plowed it under? Deliberately, thoroughly? with the determination, purposely brave, that since you cannot harvest the growth it shall enrich the soil for future

growth? Yes, yes; but where is now that future growth? What are you? What will you yet become that you are not already?

Do you remember certain days spent with another boy on the edge of an Homeric ocean? Haven't you jotted down somewhere in your profuse, disconnected notebooks particular words, phrases, then uttered, later re-fashioned and elaborated? words indicative, as nearly as words can be, of your ultimate, felt destiny? Yes . . . destiny . . . as surely as the tripled note that opens the profoundly-moving Beethoven symphony.

"A young man came to me with a message from his brother . . .
And I answered for his brother and for men . . . and I answered for the poet, and sent these signs.

"Him all wait for, him all yield up to; his word is decisive.
Him they accept, in him lave; in him perceive themselves as
amid light.
Him they immerse, and he immerses them.

"Beautiful women, the haughtiest nations, laws, the landscape,
people and animals,
The profound earth and its attributes, and the unquiet ocean,
All enjoyments and properties . . .

"He puts things in their attitudes,
He puts to-day out of himself with plasticity and love.
. . . He is the Answerer."

You, Walt, you in your complete Self feel your unrevealed capacity! Yes! You know there is in you something inexhaustible! Yes! Something deathless! Yes! An Answerer! Yes! Yes! Yes!

Walt, you contain enough; *why don't you let it out then?*
I will. To the task, then; to the destined rôle.

First, let me have a clear understanding with my lesser

self, with my human frailty and impatience and querulousness and dejection in the face of sure vicissitude. It will take years. It will likely go unrecognized and will certainly go unrewarded. . . . What are the requisites?

Here is a blank page; here a pencil.

The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet. . . . The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. . . . The passionate tenacity of hunters, woodmen, early risers, cultivators of gardens and orchards and fields, the love of healthy women for the manly form, seafaring persons, drivers of horses, the passion for light and the open air—all is an old, varied sign of the unfailing perception of beauty and of a residence of the poetic in outdoor people. . . . The poetic quality is not marshalled in rime or uniformity, or abstract addresses to things, nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts. The gaggery and gilt of years will not prevail. Who troubles himself about ornaments or fluency is lost. The old red blood and stainless gentility of great poets will be proved by their unconstraint.

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men; go freely with powerful, uneducated persons, and with the young and with the mothers of families, reëxamine all you have been told at school or church or in any book and dismiss whatever insults your own soul—

And your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency.

12

Of the quality of pathos which Walt felt in the relation existing between himself and the wife of Raoul Dumouriez, Floride Dumouriez, last of the Antoinés—excepting only a juvenile brother—was without awareness. She could not know that this delicate and intangible atmosphere, the flavor rather than the substance of emotion, alone constituted the actual hold she had upon her . . . lover? Well, yes; as the world's phrase goes.

That this was so, when she was a woman and Walt was a man, was strange, and no doubt would have baffled a spectator of their affair, had there been any. There was not; Floride saw to that. Servants she could completely control, and did with the accustomedness of one born the mistress in a servile society. But others, not slaves? The one thing she could not guard against was a possibility that some one in the neighboring houses might observe the repeated visits of one man obviously not a member of Creole society. Very well, let them do so. A word to her vile husband would be sufficient; even if Raoul found out the truth he would certainly kill any one who had dared to proclaim it—and all New Orleans knew *that*. If, also, he decided to kill his wife, Floride would meet that situation which, after all, would have no novelty among their quarrels unless through the excess of his determination and its translation into actual or attempted violence

on her person. . . . Against such violence she had long been prepared.

But suppose a woman across the street observed something and whispered it about? Every woman across the street, or across any street, had a husband, a brother, somebody close, to be *touché*. Raoul's polite word, always in his curious falsetto which caused Floride a concealed shiver. That falsetto, in her opinion, was the *nègre* in him. Some ancestor had been a witch doctor; but Raoul had his own special sorceries, of the most efficacious. He was, despite the misadventure of his encounters with some Irish Spaniard or other, a deadly duellist; what he did not accomplish personally on the *champ d'honneur* was generally attended to by his hired ruffians in the shadow of the levees.

These were the carefully balanced considerations on which the wife of Raoul Dumouriez placed her reliance. They did not insure against catastrophe but they made it seem improbable; and in the event of its befalling she did not fear for herself so much as for Walt. Why? He would be first among the natural objects of her husband's vengeance. And—though she did not doubt his personal courage or self-reliance—he was outlandishly impossible as the antagonist of Dumouriez. In that house on Royal Street she could protect him, but outside—

In a moment of relaxed assurance over him, she put to Walt the question one day:

“How would you deal with my husband? Tell me . . . not that you will have to; I will see to that.”

“I? I would not deal with him at all,” was the calm answer.

“What?” He was incomprehensible, or else craven. “Do you mean you would run away? Or perhaps you mean that you would hide behind my skirts?” Her tone was sardonic, not angry.

“No, that would not be necessary, would it?”

“It might be.” For his own *morale*, it were best he should believe that.

He shook his head serenely. “I don’t think so.”

“Very well. Assume that you are in no danger in this house, even if he should enter this room this minute. What would your life be worth over the threshold? Zat!” The epitomizing syllable vocalized a snap of her thumb and finger.

“*Ma pauvre Floride!*” he exclaimed with a tenderness she did not clearly understand. The few French words he picked up were, at least, pronounced beautifully; and his voice had nuances.

“Ah! I see! You mean that, after all, it is only I who would suffer!” was the verdict she rendered on his display of emotion.

He shook his head again; and this time, seeing that by no simple ruse—a spur rowelling his pride—would she be able to draw him out, she adopted another line. . . . Continually she was adopting other lines, testing, trying, risking, for all the world like a desperate general who has made a conquest and somehow cannot settle down and take his advantage from the dubitable gain. . . . She pleaded:

“*Cher ami*, you must know it is only my powerful anxiety for you that thus irritates me, making me say things I do not mean.”

In answer to the arm placed about his neck, Walt kissed her. His reply to her words, alone, might have seemed less reassuring.

“No one says what he means, does he, Floride? I don't pretend to. You are unhappy; I think you are always unhappy. Why? You don't know. You will never know.”

Consoled by his caress, she received this observation dreamily and with an apparent indifference; but after a little, as if his words had suggested a train of thought, she commenced to talk, half to him and half to herself:

“No, I don't know why I am unhappy. Probably you are right in declaring I shall never know. Happiness comes from within; but within me there is nothing, is there? Unless it is a hunger. . . . I love my young brother but maybe—that is only because I am separated from him. . . . When I am separated from you, I love you! Now, at this moment, I both love and hate you. How is that? Perhaps you know? *Comprenez-vous?*”

“How foolish you are to ratiocinate!” Walt told her. “You did much more wisely when you took up your position in the entrance downstairs, that Sunday, and with your invisible glance, singled me out from the crowd which was passing. That act was not a reasonable one; if it had been, it would have had no charm for you. Nor was I a reasonable choice from among those passers-by. How, then, do you expect what has followed, and exists, to be reasonable? Come, don't be reasonable!”

“It is for your sake, not my own. I have to think of you; I am responsible, if anything should happen.”

“Nothing is going to happen except that some day, naturally, you will weary of me. The oscillation you feel—first loving, then hating me—will die down. Quiet will succeed, and in that quiet you will receive me for a few moments, or a half-hour; then we will say *au revoir* as usual but you will omit to mention when I am to revisit you. And that will be all.”

“And I shall be unhappier than ever!”

But immediately she exclaimed, with conviction:

“Here! You say nothing about yourself. Why? Because you do not love me. Some other woman. She has taken from you something I want and should have—something that would make me happy! The first, sparkling freshness of your emotion, perhaps; perhaps the self-deception which creates *l’extase* of the lover. She has done me a terrible, an irremediable wrong.” In French: “The velvety bloom; she had that! She rubbed it against her cheek, carelessly, and threw away the petals.” In English: “Now I have made the discovery—not by reasoning, either. Oh, how awful for me! Don’t you want to know what it is I have discovered?”

“That you don’t love me, of course.”

“No, something different. . . . Look. Starved of love, conducted into a marriage of convention, of family, of property, I have gone on these years until my suffering, my necessity, has perverted me . . . made me different. I will illustrate: It is like an actor forced by circumstances to play a feminine rôle. Only, reversed! Behold myself, Floride Antoine, driven by inner pressures to play the masculine rôle. The aggressor, yes; to the extent possible. I

cannot go out in the streets, but I can stand in the shadow of the *foyer*. . . . But a rôle is a rôle; one cannot play it one minute to abandon it the next; one must, at the very least, sustain it all through that action. So, see! What follows? Why,"—in French—"I become endued with masculinity as a garment? *Mais, non!* The actor to succeed must think, feel, his part." English: "So with me. I have put myself in the man's rôle. What the *Rosalind* of M. Shakespeare did as a protection and continued as an exciting *plaisanterie* is for me desperate earnest."

Toward her, Walt was aware of a new complication of feeling; in her dramatic interpretation of her unhappy rôle she affected him as did the great actresses he had seen—Fanny Kemble as "Bianca" in *Fazio* was not a forced comparison nor could his experience evoke a more impressive. . . . She was engaged in a task of self-interpretation and she was wholly sincere; but he saw now for the first time how essentially an artist she was by innermost nature. That meant, not any least trace of insincerity, but a gift for seeing herself always in mental mirrors—embodied at some greater or less distance and lighted by the artificial illumination of her desires. If the desires gave out, were suddenly to be extinguished, leaving her in darkness. . . . she could not go on, she could not go on. . . .

"My mistake is that I see the truth!" she uttered stormily.

"Your mistake is that I am not great enough to fill the real rôle, dominating, masculine!" he assured her, as she lay back in his arms. "I ought to be able to make you

happy; I am not. What you call your mistake is a fault, a lack, in me." . . . Was this lying? His feeling toward her dictated the words—pity but pity without condescension, the sense of pathos so swelled by her mood to-day, a genuine tenderness and a thong by which she was forever drawing him to her. Lying? Not if feeling inspired what he said. Those only lie who speak without feeling; precise words, what do they matter? He would recite any creed that she asked or the recitation of which, by the mere sound of his voice, might help her. The real creed would be the inarticulable tie that united them.

She had a prophetic vision of her future.

"I shall go on, as an actor goes on who sees his imperfections in his rôle. Playing the same part, over and over again. The part I am forced into by something insatiable in me. What is it? I am no better than an adventuress. But the adventuress—what is her adventure? Always she plays the same part, the same rôle, to extinction. Is that adventure? There is no adventure in sex, for one is always the same sex."

"No," he admitted, "there is no adventure in sex. There is nothing of that sort; there is only the possibility of fulfilment. For most of the race."

"Fulfilment?" she murmured. "What is that word? How can you use it? It is evident to me that you do not know its meaning any more than I."

"If you mean I have not realized it, I can say I expect to."

"How?"—with controlled jealousy.

"Through you as much as through any one." Walt

was earnest. "Perhaps more than through any other one. You do not thwart or resist me. In that there is a lesson. You did not seek to define me, nor do you seek to understand me; you did but invite me, acclaim me. In that there is a lesson. Is it meaningless that your eye singled me out? is it without significance that I found you? Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd, came something whispered, communicated: 'I love you, before long I die; you have traveled a long way merely that I might look on you, touch you. You could not die till I once had looked on you. Now we are safe. We have met, we have touched, we are safe.' . . . Is it not so? And what if again we are separated by the irresistible sea? Every day, at sundown, I will salute the air, the ocean and the land. And every day, at sunrise, you will salute the land, the air and the ocean. Your eyes will be upon the ocean, the crowd. My eyes will be upon the ocean, the crowd. And among the men and women, the multitude, you will perceive one picking you out by secret and . . . divine signs . . . acknowledging none else—not parent, wife, brother, child as nearer. And from the midst of the multitude I shall perceive one picking me out, acknowledging none else so near. Lovers and perfect equals, discovering each other by faint indirections. Always the *mystère*, the surprise, the delicious renewal, the understanding passion!"

. . . What has become of happiness-unhappiness, love-hate, the sense of pathos and the sense of equal pity in this breathless communion? In the deep silence of that apartment two incomparable actors, playing against each other in the deathless drama, consummate their rôles.

The cause of the first duel between Raoul Dumouriez and the astonishing O'Donoju, though it could not be discussed by the principals, had immediately become a matter of general knowledge in New Orleans. It was that incident, observed by Walt and so many others, occurring in the French market on the Sunday in the course of which Walt and Floride Dumouriez had their first meeting. Had not O'Donoju smiled, publicly and ingratiatingly, at an exceptionally handsome woman of color, the belle of belles at the last Quadroon Ball? and the placée of Raoul Dumouriez? Dozens had seen the smile, the blankness of look which met it, and the slow, polite inclination of the head with which that stranger of striking appearance had acknowledged his mistake. Of all the observers, quite possibly Walt was alone in not knowing that a duel must follow. The insult was deliberate. Unconscious? *Pouf!* You say this South American warrior did not know she was the placée of Dumouriez? I do not believe it; but certainly, with *une femme si distinguée* he knew a challenge would follow. But what was that to him, with a wrist like lightning. First one of Dumouriez's hands, then the other. *C'est merveilleux.*

The fact was, despite sophisticated pronouncements to the contrary, the gallant O'Donoju had had no more idea of the identity of Raoul's placée when he saluted her with his smile than of fighting twice in the ensuing forty-eight hours. It is not certain that, knowing who she was, he would have acted differently. Without any other allusion

to the affair, Mlle. Fleurus observed to her suitor, some days afterward:

"I suppose, José *amigo*, you find a pretty face irresistible."

He looked at her in astonishment; said:

"*Por Dios!* It never has occurred to me that a pretty face was a thing to be resisted!"

Amid some laughter, Walt exclaimed:

"I wonder if O'Donoju isn't right? Non-resistance; that implies no temptation. The puritan, he is the fellow who is always setting up imaginary temptations. He's a shadow-boxer. He prays: 'Lead me into temptation so I may show how easily I could overcome it if it were real.' Along comes a real temptation, sneaks up on him in the rear, lays him by the heels. A swift backward kick is the best safeguard. Now, take a mule; a mule is never overcome by temptation."

"*Dios!* Make me a mule!" implored O'Donoju, adding reproachfully to Jeanne Fleurus:

"But as long as he is your father, I must not disable him."

Jeanne reflected. In an undertone:

"I will make one more effort. Come to-night!"

Walt, exchanging politeness with Madame Fleurus, screened his question and her answer.

"Where?"

"Oh . . . across Royal Street? I will slip into the entrance of any house that happens to be dark; Casa Callava usually is. Nine."

Immediately thereafter the two young men left, separ-

ating as soon as they gained the street. Walt had to return to the *Crescent* office for an hour; after dinner he was to go to Floride . . . but that was his and her secret. O'Donoju, elated over the prospect of the evening, rushed away to make certain preparations for a quick departure from the city. He would have Jeanne with him if he went; if not, if he stayed, he would have her anyway. All depended upon the measure of her success with Papa Fleurus—amiable old *embustero!* When I am his son-in-law, said the spirited José to himself, I shall handle him as he deserves; I will be perpetually solicitous about his health, his work lest he overexert himself; I will make him feel at least ten years older, the blissid old rascal, for he has made me feel that much older than I am, meself. . . .

. . . In the New Orleans of 1848 a person with one-eighth white blood was called a *sacatra*. One such, a young woman named Alceste, a grandchild of the natural daughter of the first Hippolyte Antoine, was in a strict sense the second cousin of Floride Dumouriez, born Antoine. The two children with a great-grandfather in common had grown up together in an intimacy entirely unaffected by the fact that one was the mistress and the other the slave.

When, after Floride's marriage to Raoul Dumouriez, her husband had, with no particular concealment, pursued Alceste, Floride had offered the *sacatra* her freedom. In lamentable distress, Alceste had pleaded not to be separated from her mistress; and after hearing one or two things the girl was able to tell, Floride assented, giving her certain instructions. Thereafter the daily life proceeded with external smoothness in the *Maison Dumouriez*; following a

period of sulky fits the sang-mele husband was known to have taken a placée and to be living with her to the practical desertion of his wife.

Floride and Alceste continued to share a secret.

It would keep.

14

Equally to threats and blandishments Papa Fleurus remained immovable. *Hélas!* what a parent!

“Do you want me to die to you?”

Papa Fleurus passed his pudgy hand over a head tanned by nature and the rapid calculation of cargo profits.

“I want you to die to that young vagabond,” he declared.

“But you can make him your partner!”

“What? And lose money? He cannot add, he can only kill.”

“Perhaps he can subtract.”

“Enough! Leave me. I multiply.”

“Oh, multiply, multiply! . . . I will yet teach you how to divide!”

She went out. Though furious with him, Jeanne was far from despair. Always he acquiesced before facts. Wishes, desires, emotions, plans—those were not facts; she might have known they would not stir him.

Taking the best of her jewels, as well as a sum of money she had, and ascertaining that Madame Fleurus was retired to her chamber, the daughter of the importer who dealt only with facts slipped quietly out of the house. Across Royal Street she saw to her surprise that Casa Callava was

brilliantly lighted. That family of Spanish Creoles must have returned this day to town from Pass Christian. However, the entrance of the next house was quite dark.

That was the Maison Dumouriez; she didn't want to go there. But she had told José a dark entrance; all the other houses in the vicinity were well-lighted; he would pick out this one, and—what did it matter, anyway? It was merely to meet; they would depart together after an exchange of perhaps six words.

A bell struck nine. José would be waiting, in a fever of impatience.

Jeanne crossed the street and passed under the shadowy archway. Silence. No one stepped forward, with an eager question. . . . It was strange; and she felt a chill of disappointment. But something had detained him. He would be here in a trifle, in no time at all!

She stepped back a little further into the cloak of shadow; and immediately trod on something. . . . At once she knew it was a human body; recoiling against the wall of the passage she stood for a full moment, arms outstretched to stay her from falling, the palms of her hands against the cold stone. A faint sound, half-groan half-sigh, brought her suddenly to her knees. She crouched over this . . . (but he was not dead!) . . . and despite the shuddering revulsion that controlled her body her fingers persisted in exploring the face . . . they touched the peculiarly-shaped military *chapeau* with its raised embroidery of gold lace—
“ José! ”

That cry, hardly distinct or piercing enough to attract attention above the murmur of the flowing street, was re-

ceived with acoustical courtesy by the vaulted walls and impassively conducted up the entrance staircase of stately width and a certain ornate grandeur.

15

Well before nine, O'Donoju arriving in Royal Street and mindful of Jeanne's directions had made for the Casa Calava only to stop short on observing that house's high degree of illumination. He looked about—just as, so little later, Jeanne herself was to do—and noticed that the house next door, belonging to Dumouriez, was dark; also that no other house was dark. The thought of Dumouriez's entrance as a place for his rendezvous with Mlle. Fleurus was distasteful; but he shrugged off the feeling. Time was short; Jeanne would look for him, and, in the circumstances, he would have no excuse if he failed to obey her word literally.

Quickly, without noise, he entered the enemy's archway. At once Floride Dumouriez, waiting there for Walt, glided toward him from the wall just beyond the staircase, taking his arm. O'Donoju wheeled; spoke.

“*Oui*, Jeanne—”

Floride, realizing her mistake almost before he spoke, shrank back, with difficulty checking a cry of dismay. In surprise O'Donoju, after a slight hesitation, advanced toward her. It was not Jeanne . . . but if it was not Jeanne, who, then . . . ? The idea that the mistress of that house could be waiting there in the dark was, of course, outside the range of instant conjecture.

Floride had understood earlier in the day that her hus-

band had left New Orleans. This was false. Raoul Dumouriez, seized with a sudden whim, had decided that evening to stay in town instead of going to Charleston for the races. The whim had ramified unexpectedly, as whims have a way of doing, into an offhand resolution to return to Royal Street, surprise his wife and perhaps smooth over things with her a little, outwardly at any rate. Who knew? a reconciliation might even be possible. The sang-mele had unlimited faith in his power to cajole women and amuse himself while doing so. . . . Besides, lately his beautiful placée had been altogether tiresome, too anxious to please. If Floride had a merit, it was variety, even in coldness, even in arctic anger. . . .

As Dumouriez turned into the dark entrance of his house he heard, in the unmistakable voice of his wife, a voice now sharp with fright, the words:

“No! No! Leave me alone. You—”

There was some man there with her. . . . With a leap, the sang-mele was against him. A violent struggle ensued in the darkness, a furious and merciless encounter with not a word spoken. Only the desperate gasps of those men came from their throats. But even that sound did not last. The husband of Floride Dumouriez never went unarmed. As if reserved to show its efficacy under these very special circumstances, the handy poniard, lifted from a sheath elaborately chased, passed swiftly between two ribs of the South American general, *à gauche*, and was withdrawn with equal deftness. Resistance ceased; the contending figure crumpled quickly.

Raoul Dumouriez stood up. This Irish animal—*ah, oui!*

he knew him!—was dead. He looked about but Floride had disappeared. Where? Up the staircase, or outside in the street? Should he enter the house, find her, and—? Her words had been: "Leave me alone." They made her sound blameless; but how came she down here in the passage, in darkness, with a man? with any man? . . . Well, it was important to get men to remove this corpse, *his* men who would do their job, whisper nothing and remember nothing. That, first. Later he could return and settle with Floride. *She* could say nothing. And he was happy to have slain this . . . vermin of a soldier. But now, to business. He paused, leaving the entrance, saying in French with a low laugh:

"Wait, little dead brute. I return at once with those who will drop you in the Mississippi . . . for a voyage . . ."

16

As soon as the two men grappled, Floride got away. . . .

She recognized in the second comer Raoul, whom, she had been certain, was leaving that day for Charleston. Who the man that had so frightened her might be, she didn't know, nor now care. The thing was: Raoul was back, *back!* and, at any moment, Walt might appear. . . .

The impulse to run out in the street, run to meet, to ward off Walt, she stamped on. That would spare nobody and would bring instant disclosure. . . . Raoul would come upon them unless this other person killed him. Then, perhaps, they would be all right; no casual intruder could be half so dangerous as Raoul. She must— What must

she do? What *could* she do but wait, watch fearfully to see—

A swift movement placed her part the way up the staircase, in deeper darkness, where she might gather the issue of that terrible struggle. Her heart pounded, she held her breath. But it was soon over (Raoul must have knifed him) and then, briefly, she saw her husband silhouetted in the lighter shadow where the entrance gave on the sidewalk; heard his voice, that horrible falsetto, in a contemptuous promise.

“Wait . . . I return at once . . .”

He had gone. *Now—*

What, now? If Walt walked in, no harm would come to him. He would turn at once to the staircase; with a clasp and a whisper she could draw him up with her to the rooms above . . . or she could take his arm and they could leave quickly together; could go far, oh far! from this wretched place.

She was not thinking of the man lying in the entrance; it did not occur to her that he was matter for concern. He was dead. Raoul had said so; besides, this was not new work with Raoul who, in the attenuated strain of *nègre* that was in him, seemed to preserve an undiminished ferocity, the concentrated trait of innumerable remote ancestors of a barbarousness without parallel.

How the minutes fled! She had a feeling that time was rushing past with dreadful rapidity, as if the neck of an hourglass, suddenly swelling, were letting all the sands through. How long must she wait? How long could she safely wait? . . . But her sense of the passage of time

was obliterated; she did not know whether five or fifteen minutes had passed. Oh, hurry, hurry, Walt! If, in one moment more, you do not come, I must fall back on Alceste; even that, since they will not know where to find Raoul, may miscarry. One more moment. . . .

A figure glided quickly into the entrance. But, no! this was a woman! A woman! *Dieu!* what new complication—

“ José! ”

The piteous cry of Jeanne Fleurus came distinctly to Floride, hovering on the staircase. It explained much. This, then, was the woman whom that fellow had been looking for, mistaking the house. How horrible! Floride had not caught the faint sound made by the wounded O'Donoju when Jeanne's foot stumbled on him. Now she heard from the kneeling Jeanne:

“ José! . . . You are alive, at least. Oh, what has happened here? . . . ”

With these words, arriving tardily, Walt, turning into the entrance, stopped dead, with an exclamation of astonishment.

“ Hello! What—? ”

17

He struck a match, saw by the flare the prone O'Donoju and as if obeying a swift and automatic instinct had the Irishman in his arms and was bearing him up the staircase. Jeanne and Floride followed, clinging to each other with a mutual suffocation of explanation from which Floride emerged long enough to call:

“Alceste! Alceste! La lumière!”

From above the sacatra answered, lamps were lit and Walt carried his burden to the large sofa.

“A physician?”

But Floride had already despatched Alceste “on an errand—vital.” Jeanne Fleurus said:

“I will go across to our house and send one of the servants. If he can be moved, may he not be brought over there?”

It seemed doubtful what the doctor would say. “At least, I shall hear to-night how he is?” Jeanne entreated Walt. He answered with quick emphasis, and on that “Yes-yes!” she hurried out.

Walt looked carefully at the bared breast. A clean wound with extroverted edges showed where the poniard had entered; there was little or no bleeding. He murmured: “Doesn’t look bad,” adding: “But I’m no medico.” Floride looked without flinching; then, over the body of the unconscious O’Donoju, her eyes and Walt’s met.

His look gave her what she needed.

Rapidly, in an undertone, without removing her eyes from his, she condensed the incidents of the half-hour, concluding:

“So *he* will be back. At any moment. You understand?”

“You’d rather I’d go away? Is that it? No . . . no; I can’t do that.”

“Why not? I tell you, I can deal with him. I have begun already to deal with him. Alceste, she has gone, she has gone to—”

She broke off abruptly, mysteriously; then, changing the course of her persuasion, said:

“ Besides, there is no need of involving you, of his knowing that you—”

“ Hush! ”

Voices below. Then a silence and the sound of one man's steps ascending the staircase. Floride made a gesture, incomplete; Walt had the sense of her wanting to wring her hands and not knowing just how. . . . She had time for a whisper:

“ Let me talk . . . at first . . . *me.*”

The head and shoulders of Raoul Dumouriez appeared. He took in the scene, halting at the top of the flight. On his face there was an absence of expression which permitted Walt to observe the over-perfection of the finely-chiseled features, the straightness and silkiness of the small black mustache and the weird effect of what at first appeared to be a head of closely-cropped silky black hair. Amazed at this hair, Walt could not keep his eyes off it and finally he saw the peculiar phenomenon. Not close cropping but an arrested growth made the head resemble that of a few-weeks'-old infant, dark and downy; the skin of the scalp was drawn with preternatural tightness like the head of a drum and the hair had with difficulty struggled through in a growth destined to remain forever pre-adolescent. For the rest, with his half-dropped lids, the sang-mele looked distinctly sleepy.

He stood, looking at his wife, at Walt and at the extended O'Donoju without a trace of any emotion. Floride spoke smoothly:

"With the help of this gentleman, I have brought our intruder up here. A doctor has been sent for, as he still breathes."

"*Merci.*" The husband blinked an indifferent acknowledgment to Walt. "I have some men below. We can take him away, to the hospital."

He advanced a step. Walt spoke.

"It will not do to move him until the doctor has seen him."

A shrug was the only answer as Dumouriez resumed his advance.

"You are not to touch him," said Walt, coming in front of O'Donoju.

The sang-mele stopped, with his half-awake glance taking in the details of this casual stranger. Lithe, compact, strongly-knit—yes; but easily overpowered by a call downstairs. . . . In a mincing voice turned suddenly falsetto Dumouriez observed:

"I am quite capable of taking you to the hospital with him, *mon ami*, or—to the morgue."

"Oh, damn *you*," was Walt's verbal answer, completed by an action he seemed to himself to perform intuitively, with perfect carelessness. He squarely turned his back on the sang-mele. As he bent over O'Donoju, looking with real anxiety for some trace of reviving consciousness, he was conscious of a division in himself which he found extremely bizarre. In these circumstances. . . . Not that I have not before this, times and other times, felt myself two selves; but now, faced with an actual danger, risk, emergency (what you will) the concealed self is my boss.

The usual self is roped and bound; is scared to death but looks helplessly on while I coolly offer my back to this . . . rattlesnake.

Beside him Walt could hear Floride's quickened breathing. But from behind came no sound. . . . O'Donoju was still unconscious. . . . In a matter-of-fact manner, Walt straightened up and faced easily about. The husband of Floride had made no move but, with eyes almost completely closed, mere slits, seemed to be thinking. As Walt turned, he said:

"I shall, of course, kill you for that insult. At a more proper time—"

In the grip of the self-he-didn't-know, Walt found himself interrupting with a dangerous fluency of answer.

"Kill me? Doubtless you think so. At a proper time, eh? Why, what time could be more proper than the present? Go—or come—right ahead. Here I am; here I have been now for several convenient moments. If I am a little difficult, why, there is your gang downstairs. After you have killed me you can finish killing *him*"—motioning toward O'Donoju. "You can then kill your wife; you can kill the doctor when he comes. One by one, or a dozen at a time, you can kill any others. Kill? You damned fool! What can *you* kill? One man against the world! Why, if I threw you down the staircase to that pack of vermin, they'd tear you limb from limb; you've taught them to kill! Shucks! Get out!"

The rattlesnake should be wholly the rattlesnake; it is a fatal mistake for it to possess any other wisdom than that of the serpent. A sense of something beyond the

reach of its strike or not sure to succumb to its venom is fatal. Coil, rattle, strike! is the only safeguard, in linked and unhesitating action. No man can imitate the superb automatism of the snake. A man's purpose is always and incessantly strengthening or weakening his arm. Swift are the muscles; thought is swifter. And thought is at the mercy of emotion—of pride, of anger, of doubt, of fear, of humiliation, of the sense of compared powers and comparative weakness, of possible failure. . . . When, after the coiled rattle, Walt spoke his careless "damn *you!*" the rattlesnake had failed to strike, arrested in action for the briefest second by the emotion of profound surprise. A second! at the end of which the faultless opportunity was lost forever. It would never come again; a lesser opportunity might, a greater opportunity might; but this one, never.

The intrusion of thought—and surprise is an emotion which gives instant birth to thought—placed the sang-mele at an insuperable disadvantage. The intuitive-Walt which had sprung forward in the crisis had taken further advantage, or, if you like, had increased its initial advantage, by mixing with the authentic scorn of its heaped insults more food for thought. "What can *you* kill? One man against the world!" Food for thought? yes, but arsenic for action.

Dumouriez had the sense of something moving out of his reach. It was heightened, fixed, by Floride's behavior.

Except for breath more quickly drawn, she had remained during the exchanges immobile, at the foot of the sofa on which lay the oblivious O'Donoju. She had been stand-

ing. Now suddenly she arranged a ruffle of lace on the bosom of her dress and, as Walt concluded his contemptuous interruption with the words: "Shucks! Get out!"—she laughed. A low laugh of secure amusement.

"No!" she exclaimed, astoundingly. "Don't go. Don't go, *mon Raoul*. Why should you withdraw from your own house? . . . But it would be pleasanter if you would send away those people downstairs."

Voices came from below; Dumouriez moved irresolutely, but before he had decided anything a man appeared on the staircase, the summoned physician. The scene was ended. Alceste appeared suddenly and was sent for hot water, restoratives. . . . Dumouriez, going to the head of the stairs gave a sulky order; his "people" could be heard leaving.

"Move him? Under no conditions, except to a bed," said peremptorily the physician. "Come, I will help you with that." He added, still bent over the sofa: "Close to the heart. But as long as he does not start bleeding . . . safe enough in a few days."

He gathered up O'Donoju very carefully in his arms. As Alceste conducted him to one of the bedrooms, Walt turned to Floride.

"I must go over and tell Mlle. Fleurus. She'll be anxious."

He started for the staircase, followed by a malignant look from behind the dropped lids of Raoul Dumouriez. At the same instant a commotion rose suddenly from below; feet swarmed on the stairs, and Walt stood back in astonishment. A band of perhaps a dozen white men

came welling up the wide flight with stern faces and vigilant eyes.

“There he is! There’s Dumouriez! Surround him!”

They sprang about him in a circle, the falsetto cry rang out like the squeal of a cornered rat, and a strong arm clutched the wrist that held the bared poniard, clutched it, turned it inward with a slow, remorseless, vise-like action. The knife dropped; in the grip of a dozen hands they bore him to the floor. Steel clamped the wrists and a rope knotted the ankles. Without explanation, brushing past Walt, they dragged him with them, his hobbled feet thumping the broad, descending treads.

Walt looked at Floride. She had sunk on the sofa, eyes closed. His startled eye went back to the exit through which the doctor had passed, carrying O’Donoju. In that doorway stood the sacatra Alceste, lips parted, white teeth gleaming.

18

The explanation? Walt never obtained an explanation. No one appeared to know or have heard what had become of Raoul Dumouriez. At any allusion to him men remarked that they hadn’t “seen him lately”—and talked of something else. To Jeanne Fleurus, later that evening, Walt had told what happened. And she had said:

“Forget that you were there. That is the best thing you can do, *muy amigo*. Do not mention your—delusion—to any one else. That might—”

She broke off. “I must visit José to-morrow.”

Floride would say only:

"Nothing took place, my Walt. But Dumouriez will be a long time absent. Come any time!"

He could not have questioned Alceste, even had he contemplated asking the slave what the mistress would not tell. The sacatra spoke nothing but a dialect-French.

Madison Slocomb, sounded cautiously, appeared to know no more than that "Dumouriez hasn't been around lately. At Charleston, maybe." Eugene Fuller was a blank. Finally, feeling that he could trust him, Walt took Traubel to some extent into his confidence.

The studious German listened carefully, under a pledge of silence, to a peculiar occurrence Walt had "heard about." Walt named the victim, however, "that sang-mele, Dumouriez."

"So!" said Traubel at last. "This must be another of your strange American institutions. And no one admits knowing anything about it! That is like Russia under the Tsars, or like France in the days of the Bastille. I can only make a guess. Since the Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia—how long ago? Wasn't it in 1831?—when, as I read, sixty-one whites were killed—"

"I remember. That slave insurrection. I was a boy. But Nat Turner was a negro."

"Perhaps, in his heart, Dumouriez was not more than one-sixty-fourth white."

Reflecting on this afterward, Walt found himself unable to agree. Yet it was quite possible that in his scheming the sang-mele had been willing and had made plans to identify himself with the blacks (as their leader and almost a white) . . . ultimately. For what purpose? Some fan-

tastic idea of dominion, perhaps—of empire . . . Hayti . . . Touissant L'Ouverture. It must be. Fact or suspicion; either; and the smile of a watching sacatra.

19

Momentous hour! that had molded several lives.

For on the day after his wounding Jeanne Fleurus was married to José O'Donoju as the Irish adventurer lay, still but ecstatic, in the house of his enemy; the hand of Papa Fleurus was forced. Torn from his arithmetic and percentages of profit, the importer was confronted with the *fait accompli*; as always, he acquiesced before a Fact. He did more, he made the best of it. A case of his rarest, earliest importation was transferred across Royal Street and there opened.

"Sure, 'tis a treasure of jewels cased in cobwebs," said poetically the South American general as the contents were held aloft for his view.

"And each drop shall be set in crystal," laughed Madame O'Donoju, as a house-servant appeared with glasses. She held high her thin-stemmed chalice, proposing a toast:

"To the worldly success of Fleurus & O'Donoju."

"What?"

"You are to be Papa's partner in business."

"You mean he has consented to become my partner in bankruptcy."

"Well—for better, for worse!"

"Faith, I see. You have taken me for better and he for worse."

They laughed. Jeanne said:

“It is your turn to offer a toast.”

José lifted his glass, containing the remainder of what the physician would allow him.

“To the spiritual success of O'Donoju & Fleurus!”

His convalescence caused the doctor the greatest amazement.

“Humph! Going to settle down now, I hope?”

“Soon as ever I've settled up with me friends, the Colorados. I'll become their North American financial agent—how's that? Can an Irishman become a banker? Would ye predict success in so unprecedented an undertaking?”

“An Irish arm and a French purse will win at anything except roulette.”

“*Bueno!*”

. . . Hour that molded lives! And the other half of the mold?

Floride had seen a Walt new to her (new, had she known it, to Walt himself)—a Walt who could say indifferently to the menace of Raoul Dumouriez: “*Damn you!*” . . . and calmly turn his back. A revelation? Perhaps. She had thought she fully understood the nature of the man; he was her lover, made so by her own mysterious action, by the unsubdued will of her powerful personality no longer latent nor concealed. He was her lover, yes; and he was also what she admired with the largest measure of intellectual admiration contained in her feminine nature: He was an actor, natural-born and with a tremendous gift. Once or twice she had heard him use the expression “*natural persons,*” and the expression secretly delighted her.

Of course! He was a natural person; but what was a natural person? Not a mere animal, to be sure; no. But a perfectly-endowed *actor*. Yes, that was it. A man differed from an animal in having an intelligence which made him capable of seeing himself in a rôle. No animal could see itself in a rôle. No man could help so seeing himself, at moments, anyway. And the gifted man, the natural person, saw himself so at all times, but without perturbation, without undue self-consciousness, without embarrassment or inner stage-fright. *En effet*, this peculiar and constant vision enabled him to lose all self-consciousness at almost every hour of his life, and, thus freed, act his part to the richest extent of his powers. So analyzed, Walt was truly the most natural person, the most accomplished actor, she had ever known.

And herself, she was, she considered, an actress of no mean ability, in this deeper sense that she was defining. But what chance had she had, before Walt's advent, to display her true powers? Those were of a predominantly emotional character; but what was the expression of emotions which did not include love? Disordered music, without key, without tonality. And whom had she had to love? That distant young brother, with the phase of love which is merely an immense tenderness, like a gentle melody intended to be no more than the embellishment of a major theme. It was like having to construct a sonata out of a handful of grace-notes.

Nor would a sonata, the composition for a single instrument, be what she wanted; nothing less than symphonic proclamation would suffice for her "content"—what she

had for outpouring. It was even doubtful to her whether any man or any number of men or all of her lifetime would serve adequately for the fullest manifestation, the richest proclamation of what she believed to be herself. And yet, in Walt, she had found, at the very outset, a man, just one single man, who seemed to give her inexhaustible opportunity. . . . She had begun to have a suspicion that all his variety, all his resource had been displayed in her drama when an unforeseen crisis arising gave him the chance to astonish her. *Mon brave!* But it was not for his bravery that she freshly adored him; it was his wonderful piece of histrionism in the quick turn of his rôle.

He had secrets, then, recesses which she had not fathomed. . . .

“How could you do that?” she asked Walt, frankly giving him in her voice and look the praise of incomprehension. “To say that—and then to turn your back!”

The bearded young man smiled; when he smiled it was with a burst of sunlight from the gray-blue eyes. Oddly, his beard had not the effect of ageing him; did not hide the square, generous chin. Nor did the mustache weaken the mouth, so wide, full-lipped and red-lipped, so expressive of what Walt had once called himself in talking with her, “the caresser of life.” A mouth sensuous but not sensual, capable of smacking the lips over a relished savor but incapable of lighting the eyes with the light of greed. In fact, as Floride observed, the lower half of that face was merely sensuous, eager, innocent and young; but undistinctive (it might have belonged to any man) and uncontrolling. What controlled and distinguished was above a

line drawn in the plane of the upper lip—the vigorous nose with wide nostrils, high cheekbones and remarkable eyes with well-pronounced and well-arched brows and the really dominating forehead with the black hair tumbling back from it as a wave ruffles back from the wall of the shore.

“Don’t give me any credit!” he instructed her. “Was it I you saw? Maybe that was the real ‘I,’ but the usual ‘I’ didn’t have anything to say about it. It appears this Walt Whitman is two persons—two or more, for I’m not just sure I’ve got to the end of him. One Walt was trembling at the knees, very much afraid, scared, wobbly, quaking. The other Walt came from somewhere, kicked the first in a corner and—ran things. The other Walt acted like a brave man or a fool—which? He stuck out his tongue and turned his back. Lucky he didn’t get a knife in it. I suppose he knew what he was doing, better than we do; must have? well, maybe, since all came out right. Now the other Walt’s gone. If your Raoul should walk into this room, I believe I’d jump out of the window if I didn’t jump out of my skin first. Why? I’m no fighter; have sometimes wrestled, thrown men and boys in friendly tussles; but I never *fought* any one in my life; I guess I shouldn’t know how. But . . . mystery! Where did the other Walt come from? where did he go to? Mystery, mystery!”

“He comes when he is needed. Where from? From your mind, of course, my silly Walt!”

“When he is needed? Yes, but is he dependable? I hope, so, but feel no certainty. If he comes from the mind, does he go back there? And what does he do all

the time—sleep? Or do some work we don't know about? You should be able to solve the puzzle. Women are so differently constituted—feel more and therefore know more than men.”

“All that is no mystery to me,” declared Floride. “But,” she added, “I cannot explain it.”

“The old, the never-ending trouble!” Walt exclaimed. “A man can explain but he doesn't know; a woman knows but she can't explain.”

He added: “And a man can't find out.”

20

But he knew he was on the path toward finding out.

Not for nothing had he these special insights, these moments of perception—perception without disenchantment—in which he saw with a clarity sorrowful and yet bright what must be the end of his and Floride's relation. Was he to blame? No . . . he was not to blame, any more than she. There was no blame; life was so, a mighty river—rather, an ocean. Never, from the first, had he practised deception or concealment; he had told her their destiny as he saw it; what had he withheld? That, once, he had so loved as to sacrifice something of the perfect integrity of his nature? But that was not concealed from her by his silence. She knew that, had named it between them; and he was too sincere with her to utter an empty denial. One thing, perhaps, he had withheld: The new, delicious, profoundly-troubling feeling that was astir in his heart and, in moments, had an effect of still intoxication upon his senses;—the feeling that out of the vast ocean of life in

which for all these years he had been derelictive he was at last caught up in the bosom of a silent, indissuadable stream or current or river. . . . Gulf Stream. That was the figure for it in all its majesty, moving widely and unseen. Gulf Stream, which, originating somewhere within or without him, was to carry him onward to an expanded, illimitable destiny.

That destiny was a voice *The Answerer* singing a song *The Poet*.

The song of songs would be himself, what he contained (all that the world contained and all that the unseen worlds contained); it would invert the deep wisdom of those poems of India and the East, poems he had spent years in slowly absorbing, giving them their Western complement. Whereas they accomplished the principle of Identity by losing the self in the boundless self, it was his infinitely-difficult task to demonstrate the same principle by showing how the boundless, universal self was all contained in the single, personal self, in the true individual natural person, in the separate, unitary soul which had (must, must have!) the power . . . to set free . . .

21

A power to set free seemed, indeed, to be everywhere in the air of those days of 1848, to Walt not less than to thousands of others. Everywhere? Well, not in the Southern empire of the North American republic. There Walt felt the existence of a power at once compact and widespread, but scarcely a liberating power. What was its special characteristic? what the peculiar "feel" of that

power which gave to men's minds a strange assurance and placed on their lips the confident (yes, exultant) phrases about their (our) "manifest destiny"? When before had men dared easily to name destiny as manifest, as plainly marked out? In Rome? In Athens? In Alexandria? In Nineveh? In Tyre? Yes, so might men have talked in the old days. . . .

The source of the sense of power which Walt found all about him was many-rooted. Partly it sprang from political leadership which, from the days of the founding of the Republic, had never shifted from the South. Partly the stratification of Southern society, like layer upon layer of bulwarked masonry, like the mortised and tenoned and moated wall of a feudal castle, gave to the ruling caste the sense of impregnable security. But more was owing to the philosophical doctrines and religious sanctions which, on every hand proclaimed, convinced the minds and swayed the hearts of scrupulous, honorable, conscientious and kindly men. And those who were not scrupulous or honorable, who were without conscience or kindness? This, Walt noted, sufficed for them: That the white fleece of the fields was becoming a golden fleece; cotton was rising, rising, rising; and with it rose the value of land and the value of those who worked the land, whose dark bodies, glistening with sweat, were in the view of some savants but doubtfully human.

But God damn me! God bless me! Walt apostrophized himself, I can't at all take the view, even the composite, blended view, which all these Southerners are satisfied with. They tilt the picture this way, that way, asking: Isn't it

pretty? Isn't it glorious! And it seems to me neither pretty nor glorious. Why? Not that thousands and thousands of the blacks aren't as well off, or better off, under slavery than under any form of freedom I (or any one else, likely) can conceive for them. Some terribly suffer, sold South from Virginia and lashed by overseers; would not a same or greater percentage suffer in African tribal wars and cruelties? Ah! that touches a point. America isn't Africa. Shall America perpetuate, even on the smallest scale, Africa?

He began to see more clearly the real nature of his objection, which had not for its sharpest focus the glistening bodies in the fields or the debatable souls of black folk. Those who affirmed the negro to have no soul were unshakeably sure that his master had a soul. And it was that soul, Walt felt, which stood in daily, hourly peril.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside, he wrote in a notebook wherein he was beginning to set down phrases, sentences, penciled word-pictures—the stuff of some day's poem or poems. *I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile; through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak, and went where he sat on a log, and—*“gave him reassurances”? Too roundabout, that; faulty in cadence; weak. The simple, vigorous verb—*and*, he resumed writing, *assured him, and brought water, and fill'd a tub for his—*“sweaty” will not do. The verb, the verb!—*his sweated body and bruis'd feet, and gave him a room that enter'd from my own—*if any choose to read into that phrase a deeper meaning, I

will not exclude a deeper meaning—and gave him some coarse clean clothes, and remember perfectly well . . .

What, what? The condensed, epitomizing half-dozen words, giving with sparse stroke that vivid picture? . . . and remember well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness—NOT “rolling eyes,” but eyes that moved ceaselessly sideways, watching fearfully in all directions from their corners, eyes that circumvented everything in the room and pierced doors and searched behind the simple furniture—and remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles; he staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass’d north; (I had him sit next me at table—my fire-lock lean’d in the corner) . . .

That was oh! good, good! I know it to be good. Let me see if I can’t, here and now, do another picture. . . .

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses; the block—what verb to describe that block’s movement? “swigs”? no; hasn’t the right ring. I’ve the word!—the block swags underneath on its tied-over chain; the negro that drives the dray of the stone-yard, steady and tall he stands, pois’d on one leg on the stringpiece; his blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast, and loosens over his hip-band; his glance is calm and commanding—he tosses the slouch of his hat away from his forehead . . .

I love this, delight in this! Each word must tell like the sharp line of an artist’s apparently careless but really studied drawing; each verb must be a significant sweep of the crayon over the drawing-board. Now for a phrase or two, final, giving perspective; as when, the drawing completed,

you stand back with cocked eye to take all in quickly. . . .

The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache—falls on the black of his polished and perfect limbs.

There! Take it all in, the whole, the composition, the lighting. And the meaning? Is it just a bright, fugitive glimpse? It means nothing unless it has kindled emotion in me; nothing means anything except as it moves me, you, us all. But the aroused emotion? That can, after all, only be hinted; can't be said. A hint, then; just a hint. . . .

I behold the picturesque giant, and love him . . .

Something further, barely touched on . . .

And I do not stop there . . .

Don't stop with any one man, or with all men; to round off, complete my thought . . . *and I do not stop there*—he re-read, and then wrote firmly—

In me the caresser of life wherever moving. That completes the thought, my happy phrase of t'other day. *Life* is the significant word; *the caresser of life—wherever moving.* . . . It sings! It sings!

To the moments of ecstasy succeeded the hour of apathy from which he emerged into a feeling of sadness as he thought of his fast-approaching birthday, end of this Fifth Month. He would be twenty-nine; and had accomplished nothing.

Fifth Month, and up at the North the lilacs would be richly blossoming. Heart-shaped leaves and delicate, pointed blossoms.

Suddenly, sitting there at his desk he could smell the

lilacs. . . . Oh, Esther, Esther! Why couldn't I have had you? and now I have not even the embosoming lilacs, not even the sight of the farmyard with its whitewashed palings and, standing beside the bush, your little throat among the odorous clusters, *you*. I have nothing but the remembered fragrance—sharper, sweeter, more ethereal, more lasting than all these heavy perfumes of the glistening, magnetic South. It was this month, the month of lilacs, that . . .

The renunciation—yours? mine?—is made, the grievous loss is safely scarred over, I suppose; then why this recurring weakness? this trembling in all my young, strong body? Will it always be so? Oh, I can't think, work; I can at such times as this only suffer. My loves, my friendships which mean so much to me don't, can't, in all their totality—past, present, future—mean more than the least fraction of what you could have meant to me. . . .

A sound of approaching footfalls. Walt looked up. It was Madison Slocomb in the easy attire of a planter; he had just bought acreage in Mississippi and, abandoning commerce, contemplated his accession to the Southern aristocracy with the satisfaction of a commoner lifted to the peerage.

"Hello!" he said genially. "How's things?"

"Well," was the answer. "But I am going to leave you. Going North again. I've just decided."

"Pshaw! I'm sorry. Don't suppose I can induce you to stay?" The regretful acquiescence was due to a keen look at Walt's face.

"No. . . . No. You've been mighty good to me. New Orleans, working for you, everything, the whole shooting

match, is going to be a pleasant, yes, an affectionate recollection."

"Good. I'm glad of that. I'll just keep alive a hope that you'll come back."

23

To Eugene Fuller a brief farewell was also necessary, and Walt received a promise of such further news as might enable him to follow the fortunes of the Marchesa Ossoli in Italy. Then, good-by to the fiscal agent of the South American Colorados; good-by to Jeanne.

"I shall miss your *cercle*," Walt avowed to Mme. O'Donoju, "or rather, since now you're married, it has become a *salon*, hasn't it?"

"A *salon à deux*," said the wife of José O'Donoju, with a glance, mischievously merry—and, yes, something else—at the ex-general, her husband.

The commanding officer drew Walt aside for a parting whisper.

"I hope to forestall the *salon* with a nursery," he communicated. "Good-by, me friend; the luck of the O'Donojus go with you!"

The earnest Traubel had already left New Orleans; had, in fact, left America, to return to Germany and watch the work of the National Assembly just convening at Frankfurt for the purpose of framing a constitution for a free German State.

Last, and immediately following a walk around the city—one more breakfast in the French Market, one more stroll along Canal Street—Walt sought out Floride. . . .

She received him, her eyes intimately reading his face in which she found, as ever, no effort at concealment. During the perfunctory exchange of a few conventional words, she remained composed and, in the beauty of her morning toilette, a figure of the embodied Creole tradition—*petite*, lovely in the subtle proportioning of her body, assured; altogether admirable. But then, as he hesitated slightly in what he had to say, her lip quivered, two tears forming in her eyes crept slowly down her cheeks, and with the sudden burst of the storm of her passion she flung her arms about his shoulders.

“No! No! *Je t'implore!* Stay! . . . stay . . .”

The light pressure of his hands upon her arms was only momentary, but seemed to renew her fortitude, her immense personal pride. She was calm again, she held herself aloof.

“*Oui. Il faut . . .*”

There was a moment of silence in which he could not lift his eyes. She repeated, tonelessly: “*Il faut . . . il faut . . . it must . . . it must . . . souffrir . . .*”

At the word “suffer” he looked up, gently but definitely.

“Yes, we suffer. We will always suffer, and we will always be glad of it, you and I. Neither of us would be happy without . . . the adventure of passion. I mean *passion*, the pure, full, right sense of the word—‘suffering.’ The adventure of passion—and the adventure of love.” She listened, eyes lowered, lips parted, to the timbre of his voice, like the sound of a bell, a little husky-throated, as if some faint flaw in the metal of the casting made the sound troubled. “Both of us have endured things and we have begun

to find endurance—delicious? Yes, there is something joyous in the reality that we know how to endure. The only reality! The things we endure aren't real; but our endurance of them *is*. That's the sweet *self* in us, that exquisite sense, feeling, renewing passion of endurance, of suffering. . . .”

“ Kiss me! Kiss me, Walt! ”

She clung to him and he obeyed her. She said:

“ After you—there will be others? ”

“ After me—others.”

“ You? ”

“ I'll turn sometimes into a shadowy passage. And then I'll feel with a thrill of clear joy your hand placed upon my arm. I'll just whisper: ' Floride, you wish—me? ' . . . Oh, my darling, don't, don't cry so! ”

But even as he endeavored to console her, torn with pity for her unhappiness, which would pass, he knew, relieved by her yielding to it—even as he held her in his arms for this last, last time, the sharp, ethereal scent of blossoming lilacs mastered him. Memory! Thou vast rondure, thou mighty ocean !

24

The sense of wonder, of constant miracle was upon Walt as he voyaged up the Mississippi. This land, these States! By day he saw, beyond the low, flat banks, the wide-spreading farmlands; by night he looked at the sky, fully of starry constellations, like an enormous banner flung over the destinies of the peoples of the new Republic. The sense of all the eye could reach and much, much more than the eye

could reach was strong—awake, asleep. Concentrate, he tried to reduce this irresistible emotion to words, sitting long hours with pencil and notebook, writing, crossing out. . . .

Starting from fish-shape Paumanok, where I was born, he wrote, and after a long interval, his thought turning affectionately, with lively anticipation, homeward: Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother. . . .

He could articulate, join together, nothing now; so must just set down detached fragments, for later weaving.

Americanos! Masters! For you a program of chants. Chants of the prairies, chants of the long-running Mississippi. O the lands! interlinked, food-yielding lands! of coal and iron; of gold; of cotton, sugar, rice. Land of the pastoral plains, sweet-air'd interminable plateaus! See, in arrière, the wigwam, the trail, the hunter's hut, the flatboat, the maize-leaf, the claim staked out, the rude fence; finally the backwoods village. See, beyond the Kansas, countless herds of buffalo, feeding on short curly grass. See the strong and quick locomotive, as it departs, panting, blowing the steam-whistle; see plowmen plowing farms. See mechanics busy at their benches, with tools; see from among them, superior judges, philosophers, Presidents emerge, drest in working dresses.

He sat dreamily listening to the voices of the leadsman and the pilot. Sailing the Mississippi at midnight was a good subject for a poem. Perhaps the idea dimly in the back of his mind was wrong; perhaps he should see if he could not cast his thoughts into some of the regular, ordered, *piloted* channels of song. Rimed, meter'd verse. . . .

Setting to work conscientiously he spent the rest of the afternoon on the projected lines suggested by the river at night, with this final result:

*Vast and starless, the pall of heaven
Laps on the trailing pall below;
And forward, forward, in solemn darkness,
As if to the sea of the lost we go.*

*Now drawn nigh the edge of the river,
Weird-like creatures suddenly rise;
Shapes that fade, dissolving outlines
Baffle the gazer's straining eyes.*

*Towering upward and bending forward,
Wild and wide their arms are thrown,
Ready to pierce with forked fingers
Him who touches their realm upon.*

*Tide of youth, thus thickly planted,
While in eddies onward you swim,
Thus on the shore stands a phantom army,
Lining forever the channel's rim.*

*Steady, helmsman! you guide the immortal;
Many a wreck is beneath you piled,
Many a brave yet unwary sailor
Over these waters has been beguiled.*

*Nor is it the storm or the scowling midnight,
Cold, or sickness, or fire's dismay—
Nor is it the reef, or treacherous quicksand,
Will peril you most on your twisted way.*

*But when there comes a voluptuous languor,
Soft, the sunshine, silent the air,
Bewitching your craft with safety and sweetness,
Then, young pilot of life, beware.*

This, as he read it over the following day, was not poetry. He did not know what it was; "flapdoodle, I guess," he said to himself. His critical intelligence studied the lines comparatively. The opening figure of the two palls was good, though worn . . . the third line was weak, especially

in the repetition of "forward" . . . with the second stanza the Poesque effect was confirmed but any dignity the verses possessed was shipwrecked on the awful (awful!) line: "Him who touches their realm upon" . . . to give Poe credit, he would never have perpetrated a line like that . . . on the other hand, the line: "Steady, helmsman! you guide the immortal" had a certain ring and elevation; was dignity pretty successfully recaptured; but then, immediately, besides the tiresome inversion of verbs one came upon the equally tiresome stock poetical offsets: "Many—many; nor—nor" . . . and *damn* the necessities of meter, to call a quicksand "treacherous" was to be silly; might as well talk about the "dark darkness" or "sticky mud" . . . and as for the last stanza . . .

If it was intended as an indirect reflection of his own experience South, it was false—false! But wasn't it false, anyway? He considered a little. Yes, I think it is a piece of utter claptrap, just nice smooth conventional "solemn warning"—like a book for children's Sunday reading . . . trash. And the whole "poem"?

"God bless me!" he exclaimed aloud, suddenly. "Lydia Sigourney might have written it."

Just the thing for *Godey's Ladies' Book!*

Cheap, slick, water-your-hair-and-wave-it-back-from-your-forehead sentimentality.

He could see the contemptuous grin on the clean, fresh face of any hardy young woodman, bayman, pioneer. . . . Unquestionably he could sell the thing. Well, perhaps he might sell the thing; that, it struck him laughably, was all it was good for. . . .

What was wrong? He had filled the mold faithfully enough; had had as much as the usual inspiration. But *damn!* Those lines bore no relation to usual life, as it was lived; above all, bore no relation to the life and breath of vigorous, rough, crescent America. This large, irregular, expanding land had, if it had anything, two striking characteristics: One was the racing sap of a national adolescence, the other was a great, expansive drift of thought and character—something loosely stratified and geologically-forming about it. The large, loose drift of character, unconsciously forming; that was it.

Pretty little rondels, ballades, villanelles; carefully sing-songed and sawed-off lines, chiming syllables—*they* wouldn't express it. Besides, there was about them the affectation, if you tried to fit them to American subjects, that there would be about an American order of nobility . . . something imported, all put up in nice, neat packages . . . alien. Take the grand idea of democracy, not merely political democracy but the felt-for brotherhood of all men in a free nation: Could you keep it in (say) iambic pentameters? wouldn't it spill over? swash around? . . . You could only proclaim it in surges like the surges of the Atlantic, beating upon Paumanok; you could only chant it; you could only set its spirit free.

His thought, looping back, returned to Floride. . . . There again, the same questing difficulty. The emotion she inspired in him had its own rhythm; not a correct, formal swing at all; something broken about it, something very beautiful. . . . In the high saturation of his emotion he again set to work. . . . By nightfall, though it had taken

far longer to achieve, he was measurably satisfied with seven lines of varying length; was sure to himself of their cadence—half-recitative, half-arioso—and, in the mood of completest sincerity in which he had wrought them, he must put his trust for the supreme essential: That they might touch in some one else, some future day, the feeling in which he dwelt.

*Once I pass'd through a populous city, imprinting my brain, for
future use, with its shows, architecture, customs, traditions;
Yet now, of all that city, I remember only a woman I casually
met there, who detain'd me for love of me;
Day by day and night by night we were together,—All else has
been forgotten by me;
I remember, I say, only that woman who passionately clung to
me;
Again we wander—we love—we separate again;
Again she holds me by the hand—I must not go!
I see her close beside me, with silent lips, sad and tremulous.*

He did not know whether this was a poem, but it was the best expression of what he felt. . . . The *truest*.

25

About noon on a Saturday the river steamer *Pride of the West* put Walt ashore, with her other passengers, at St. Louis. The Mississippi voyage had been uneventful, though pleasant; with good weather and no great crowd of passengers, yet with every berth taken. Finding that he could secure passage on the steamboat *Prairie Bird*, bound up the Illinois River and leaving at dusk, he bought his ticket and spent the few hours he had in St. Louis hunting a meal. This seemed to involve rambling all over town but was an errand unfavorable for sightseeing.

The *Prairie Bird* cast off promptly (her destination was La Salle) but encountered, in a couple of hours, such a rain and blow as made her haul in along shore and tie fast to the bank. Her whole night's passage, in consequence, was only thirty miles. Between an overload of passengers and a deckload of freight, Walt, who had spent an uncomfortable night on the floor of the cabin, found himself hardly able to turn around.

The resounding names of some very small villages on the river drew his attention—Marseilles, Naples, and so on. The river banks were low and grew a very rank vegetation. At Peoria he had the impression of a pleasant town; going ashore while the *Prairie Bird* lingered, he was struck with the rich quality, and cheapness, of the surrounding country. Three or four miles from Peoria, the best of soil could be bought, he learned, for \$3 or \$4 an acre.

At La Salle the *Prairie Bird* shoo'd them every one away; like most of the travelers Walt was to go on board a canal-boat bound for Chicago. In the interval he bumped against a man whose face was remotely familiar. The other stared with equal perplexity and doubt at Walt. Finally:

“Haven't I run across you, East, some years back?” Walt asked.

“I was East—le' me see—back in '40.”

“In '40? I was schoolteaching on—Hold a minute! D'you remember walking one day, about this time o' the year, along a Long Island road and falling in with two-three other travelers? One was a nigger, one was a Whig, a politician, all the time dipping snuff and sneezing his head off, I was a third—”

“Sure’s I’m alive! I remember—remember well!”

“You were the fellow from Illinois.”

“You bet! An’ the’ was one more—fellow with thin gold earrings, sailor of some sort. I remember you!”

They canvassed that dispersed company. The Illinoisan asked:

“You don’t know what became of any of those people, I s’pose?”

“Yes,” said Walt, “I do—one. The sailor-chap’s by way of being a celebre, a notoriety, now. Name was Herman Melville. You recall he was talking some about going on a whaling voyage? Seems he fetched up at New Bedford, Nantucket, or somewhere and joined a whaler. He and another fellow were ill-used and shook the ship in the Pacific Islands—place called Nukahiva, one of the Marquesas group. Warlike natives made them prisoners; after several months Melville’s companion escaped; then an Australian whaler picked up Melville. He batted around the Pacific for a year or two longer; came home to New York about three-four years ago, and wrote a book about his experiences—*Typee* was the name of it; made a pronounced sensation. Very striking picture of his life among the cannibals. I think he’s since written another book, same sort, but am not sure.”

“You don’t say!”

“The others I’ve never seen—you’re the first. In fact, I never ran across Melville, only know about him. Look here, weren’t you treasure-hunting on Long Island? After Captain Kidd’s buried gold? I seem to recollect it.”

“Yes; I was one of those crazy people”—sheepishly—

“but I got all over that foolishness. Look’s now, though, as if the chance to strike it rich was before me at last. Have you heard? they say gold has been found in California! *Lots* of it, lying right on the surface o’ the ground!” His excited voice sank nearly to a whisper.

“So the report was in New Orleans, some time before I left.”

“I’m goin’ there if I have to crawl on my hands and knees.”

Walt laughed. “Well, you’re welcome to all you can lay hold of. Looks to me as if you’d have plenty of company; great deal of excitement, I find, everywhere.” He mused. “Wonder how our old friend the Whig politician is, these times? Sneezing for Taylor, no doubt!”

“The Whigs are going to carry the country this fall, all right. Old Zach’s a fine candidate; Cass the Michigander can’t beat him, with Martin Van Buren and the Free Soil crowd bolting the Democrats. Say! you ought to read the speech our Congressman, Abe Lincoln, made t’other day about Ginerel Cass! Wait; I’ve got the paper with it in right in my pocket.” He fumbled and produced the sheet. “You know, years back, Abe was a volunteer when we was raising soldiery to tame old Chief Black Hawk and shove him an’ his warriors back acrost the Mississipp’. ’Twa’n’t anything; Abe’s only battle was with his own men, once, when they’d got hold of a poor old friendly Injun and was goin’ to hang him. . . . Here, you read this. . . . Your boat leavin’ on the canal? Take it with you; ’twill ease the tedjiousness! . . . Darn glad to ’ve run acrost you again. So long! . . .”

The canal-boat, moderate-sized, with about seventy passengers, got off bravely but almost immediately stuck on a mud-bar. While she was with difficulty and no great despatch being worked free, Walt unfolded the newspaper and turned to a marked column containing the Congressman's speech. Evidently Mr. Lincoln, as a Whig, had had a little fun with the Democrats. He read:

“The other day one of the gentlemen from Georgia, an eloquent man, and a man of learning, so far as I can judge, not being learned myself, came down upon us astonishingly. He spoke in what the Baltimore *American* calls the ‘scathing and withering style.’ At the end of his second severe flash I was struck blind, and found myself feeling with my fingers for an assurance of my continued existence. A little of the bone was left, and I gradually revived. He eulogized Mr. Clay in high and beautiful terms, and then declared that we had deserted all our principles, and had turned Henry Clay out, like an old horse, to root.

“This is terribly severe. It cannot be answered by argument—at least I cannot so answer it. I merely wish to ask the gentleman if the Whigs are the only party he can think of who sometimes turn old horses out to root. Is not a certain Martin Van Buren an old horse which your own party have turned out to root? and is he not rooting a little to your discomfort about now?

“But the gentleman from Georgia further says we have deserted all our principles, and taken shelter under General Taylor's military coat-tail, and he seems to think this is exceedingly degrading. Well, as his faith is, so be it unto him. But can he remember no other military coat-tail under which a certain other party have been sheltering for near a quarter of a century? Has he no acquaintance with the ample military coat-tail of General Jack-

son? Does he not know that his own party have run the five last presidential races under that coat-tail? And that they are now running the sixth under the same cover? ”

Walt was laughing to himself, so that some of the others on the boat cast occasional curious and smiling glances in his direction.

“ Yes, sir, that coat-tail was used not only for General Jackson himself, but has been clung to, with the grip of death, by every Democratic candidate since. You have never ventured, and dare not now venture, from under it. Your campaign papers have constantly been ‘ Old Hickories,’ with rude likenesses of the old General upon them; hickory poles and hickory brooms your never-ending emblems; Mr. Polk himself was ‘ Young Hickory,’ ‘ Little Hickory,’ or something so; and even now your campaign paper here is proclaiming that Cass and Butler are of the true ‘ Hickory stripe.’ ”

“ Now, sir, you dare not give it up. Like a horde of hungry ticks you have stuck to the tail of the Hermitage lion to the end of his life; and you are still sticking to it, and drawing a loathsome sustenance from it, after he is dead. A fellow once advertised that he had made a discovery by which he could make a new man out of an old one, and have enough of the stuff left to make a little yellow dog. Just such a discovery has General Jackson’s popularity been to you. You not only twice made President of him out of it, but you have had enough of the stuff left to make Presidents of several comparatively small men since; and it is your chief reliance now to make still another.”

The comparison of the Democrats to the fellow who could make a new man and have some stuff left for a little yellow

dog had set Walt to laughing consumedly. Several passengers called out to know what he was reading.

“Hold on till I finish,” he answered. “Then you can have it.”

“Mr. Speaker, old horses and military coat-tails, or tails of any sort, are not figures of speech such as I would be the first to introduce into discussions here; but as the gentleman from Georgia has thought fit to introduce them, he and you are welcome to all you have made, or can make by them. If you have any more old horses, trot them out; any more tails, just cock them and come at us. I repeat, I would not introduce this mode of discussion here; but I wish gentlemen on the other side to understand that the use of degrading figures is a game at which they may not find themselves able to take all the winnings.”

It appeared that at this point in the speech there had come from the Democratic side cries of “We give it up!” to which the Illinois Congressman had responded:

“Aye, you give it up, and well you may; but for a very different reason from that which you would have us understand. The point—the power to hurt—of all figures consists in the truthfulness of their application; and, understanding this, you may well give it up. They are weapons which hit you, but miss us.

“But in my hurry I was very near closing this subject of military tails before I was done with it. There is one entire article of the sort I have not discussed yet—I mean the military tail you Democrats are now engaged in dovetailing into the great Michigander. Yes, sir; all his biographies (and they are legion) have him in hand, tying him to a military tail, like so many mischievous boys tying a

dog to a bladder of beans. True, the material they have is very limited, but they drive at it might and main. He *invaded* Canada without resistance, and he *outvaded* it without pursuit. As he did both under orders, I suppose there was to him neither credit nor discredit in them; but they constitute a large part of the tail. He was not at Hull's surrender, but he was close by; he was volunteer aid to General Harrison on the day of the battle of the Thames; and as you said in 1840 Harrison was picking huckleberries two miles off while the battle was fought, I suppose it is a just conclusion with you to say Cass was aiding Harrison to pick huckleberries."

"Lord, what a good speech!" chuckled Walt. Said some one:

"Here, gimme that paper, will you?"

"Jest a minute; jest a minute!"

Congressman Lincoln had continued with an allusion to his own military career:

"By the way, Mr. Speaker, did you know I am a military hero? Yes, sir; in the days of the Black Hawk war I fought, bled, and came away. Speaking of General Cass's career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it as Cass was to Hull's surrender; and, like him, I saw the place very soon afterward. If General Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes . . . although I never fainted from the loss of blood . . ."

"Here, take it!" Walt chucked the newspaper to several impatient bystanders. "That's the funniest speech I've

ever read; in a way it beats Webster! at any rate, when we all know Cass is only a pressed-pantaloon militaire."

At last free of the mudbank, the canal-boat progressed slowly. The voyage—if one could so call it—was full of discomfort; without the coolness at night, the journey would have been, Walt felt, insufferable. At Chicago he stayed for the next day's steamer which would land him eventually in Buffalo; the excellence of the American Temperance Hotel, where he slept, partly made up for the weariness of the journey North.

Blue and wide in the bright sunshine of the morning lay the expanded waters of Lake Michigan, and what followed in the next few days was so spacious, so sight-absorbing, that Walt spent long dreaming hours over it. Michigan, Huron, Erie!

"America always!" he told himself. "Always the free range and diversity . . . the prairies, pastures, forests, cities, travelers, Canada—the snows. Always these compact lands, lands tied at the hips with the belt stringing the huge, oval lakes. . . ."

When he could bring himself to withdraw his eyes from the surrounding vision, when, for an hour or so, the movement of the ship in the inland sea promised no new aspect of the wonderland through which he was passing, he busied himself with his notebook. The phrase he had struck on, as expressing the American environment and its working, "the large, loose drift of character, unconsciously forming," haunted the back of his mind. He struggled for collateral lines, phrases. . . .

The log at the wood-pile, he wrote, the ax supported by it.

. . . *The sentiment of the huge timbers of old-fashion'd houses and barns. The remember'd print or narrative, the voyage at a venture of men, families, goods; the outset anywhere. The settlements of the Arkansas, Colorado, Ottawa; the slow progress, the scant fare, the ax, rifle, saddle-bags. . . .*

Then, in a briefly-sustained burst of clear, white light of inspiration, the fist of his disengaged hand clenching and unclenching:

*The beauty of all adventurous and daring persons,
The beauty of wood-boys and wood-men, with their clear un-
trimm'd faces,
The beauty of independence, departure, actions that rely on
themselves,
The American contempt for statutes and ceremonies, the bound-
less impatience of restraint,
The loose drift of character, the inkling through random types,
the solidification.*

There he had it, placed, in its setting, like a jewel . . . : and the inspiration lasting a second longer, or with a short flash returning, he put down, as an after-thought, the line:

The large, unconscious scenery of my land . . .

The pencil dropped from his fingers; he sat inert, head bent a little forward, quietly, deeply thinking. A casual speculation as to what he would do when he fetched back in New York drifted over the surface of his thought as an unconsidered trifle floats on a lake's wide waters. He never knew what he would do. . . . It made no possible difference, actually, whether he "nailed" again—that's to say, helped his carpenter-brother—or set type in the *Eagle* office (he had

no fool pride; wasn't sensitive about descending from editor to compositor; would as lief do anything he could do well); or whether he would try to pick up a living by fugitive work as an author. He could sell bits here and there. . . . And that would give him the days he wanted, needed, must have—days for loitering on Broadway and mixing with the crowds on the sidewalks, days spent in foundries, shops, rolling mills, slaughter-houses, woolen and cotton factories, shipyards, on wharves; days with people (all sorts of people!) merrymaking at clambakes, races, weddings and on sailing and bathing parties; days on ferries, in taverns, in the interiors of prisons, hospitals and poorhouses—at the funerals of the great and the poor. Nights, too, at the opera, at plays of which he was so fond, at political meetings, at carousings. . . .

I do not begin to know the people, he said to himself.

Whatever I do, I shall really be immersing myself in the life all about me. The Gulf Stream! . . . Whatever I do, I shall be (now at last consciously) preparing myself for *this*. His eye fell again on the lines scribbled in his notebook. To *answer*, in some fashion, for all America . . . to be, not perhaps worldlily, but consciously, intently the Great Poet. . . .

Suddenly he sighed. It will take years, years! he gravely acknowledged to himself. Then aloud, with intensity:

“Let it! Let it!” he exclaimed.

END OF PART TWO

PART THREE
DARK MOTHER

I

“WILLIAM,” Walt was saying, “damn me if you aren’t even a disturbing influence as a listener! You listen—*impetuously*. You have a charged, poised air; electrical in your silence and lightning in your discourse!”

William Douglas O’Connor laughed, and the laugh was filled with his superb, spilling personal magnetism, vitality. Since their first meeting in Boston in 1860, two years earlier, he and Walt Whitman had been immediate, close friends. The Irish-American was what, all his life, Walt felt he had most wanted; the singer of the *Song of Myself* was a man, or over-man, whom O’Connor could love, minister to, help and frankly worship with a worship intelligent, not blind. They were reciprocally inspiring one to the other.

“On! On! Forget about me!” O’Connor said warningly. “Tell me about Emerson. Why, oh, why the devil didn’t you tell me about your talk with him before? You wouldn’t, or you didn’t.”

“I did, William!”

“Oh, the fact—yes. But no details! That was when I had known you so short a time, I couldn’t presume to ask for details. What did Emerson say, exactly? What arguments did he use against the poems you’ve now grouped as *Children of Adam*?”

“Arguments? He used them all. Heaps, loads; every argument that ever was invented, I guess. I couldn’t answer ’em; didn’t try. But I finally told him it was no good. No good, no good, no good at all!”

Walt brought his fist down on a small table. His clear eyes shone with a light of vivacity, amusement and—something excited but wholly serious, as if behind the fun and the frolic of the recollection there lay the sharp memory of a fateful determination. The gray and white so plentifully present in his abundant hair and beard, so contrasted with masses of hair still black, made him ordinarily look middle-aged or even older. But not at such moments as this, when, in close conversation one could see the firm, smooth skin of the upper cheek, with a good color; when the direct light of the youthful eyes shone upon his auditor; and when the actuality of his lightly-carried forty-three years was suddenly impressed by a supple movement of the muscular body or the swift play of a thrust-out arm.

“Arguments, yes!” he resumed, answering O’Connor. “Emerson had them, every one. But they all came down to this: The certainty, the inevitability, of being utterly misunderstood. Mind you, William, Emerson himself did not misunderstand; couldn’t misunderstand, big, insightful man that he is. But, he said, and I couldn’t controvert him: The world will misunderstand; the world will say this is a naked, shameless, indecent, pornic fellow, this Walt Whitman—a fellow who makes his toilet in public, who counts nothing sacred and who knows no such thing as seemly reticence. And Emerson asked me: Is it worth risking all the message you have for them for the sake of

this one item of the message? I didn't answer. There could be no verbal answer."

"Good God!" O'Connor's indignation flashed forth, touched with Keltic humor. "Aren't we all naked under our clothes? as I asked a woman t'other evening when she shuddered at the mention of you and your *Leaves of Grass*."

"Emerson would enjoy that!"

"Yes, I think so! No one argues for the recitation of the *Children of Adam* poems in public before large, mixed audiences, any more than any one argues for undressing in public. But what I want to know is: Don't these idiotic people ever undress at all? Don't they, once in a while at least, take off their clothes privately? By the same token, don't they, occasionally, if only for a bath and a change, take off their dirty old mental garments and consider themselves—their souls, their real longings, desires, ambitions, hopes—nakedly, honestly, and without self-deception? Which are they, people or ostriches? . . . Oh, Walt, what a shabby, furtive state the human mind goes about in! To my thinking, it is a disgrace to us that a poet dare not, for example, sing the super-mortal raptures of the nuptial night."

"Right! You are more than right, William. There you've named a common human experience or ecstasy, clean, healthful, joyous—a crowning moment of a lifetime. But tabu! One is privileged to talk about other things equally sacred, about God Himself, His nature, purposes, character. But one may not talk freely about men and women. Is it right? I swear it isn't right! I told Emerson it wasn't right. And Emerson did not deny the wrongness of it, but

said: We must be patient, and inch along toward freedom; we must make haste slowly. Then I said: The world has not been moved forward by the patient corrections, small adjustments, of coral-insect men grubbing steadily through the ages. The world has been pried up by Archimedean levers, by Savonarolan bonfires, by positive tortures, agonies, such as that of France in 1789; by the flaming and fearless prophecies of Isaiahs and by the revolutionary declarations of Galileos. *E pur si muove!* 'Nevertheless, it *moves!*' . . . Emerson denied not that, either! Up and down the breadth of Boston Common, between old elms, by Beacon Street, we walked for two solid hours of a bright, sharp, February midday. Emerson did almost all the talking. He was—is still, I suppose—in his prime; a keen mind in a vigorous body, physically and morally magnetic, full-armed and wielding with equal force the emotional as well as the intellectual weapon. William, it was a terribly one-sided encounter! He was in overwhelming force; he reconnoitered, reviewed, attacked, pressed home, like an army corps in order, artillery, cavalry, infantry. . . . But here was the deep paradox! I was outpointed in every direction, headed off, surrounded, called upon to surrender, ringed about, tactically wiped off the field—and yet felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey. Finally, 'What have you to say to such things?' Emerson asked. And I told him candidly: 'Only that while I can't answer them at all, I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it.' Whereupon we went and had a good dinner at the American House! "

"And since?"

"Thenceforward I never wavered; since then I've never been touched with qualms, as, I'll confess, I had been two-three times before."

"Bravo, Walt!"

Walt appeared to muse; then laughed.

"You and I were not made for qualms, William! Some day we'll quarrel, I suspect. You have a personal similarity to Thoreau extending beyond the circumstance that both you and he lost your jobs defending old John Brown of Harpers Ferry."

"Damn you, Walt, I'm no Puritan eccentric like Thoreau!"

"Thoreau was too narrow, yes; a good deal like the sharp-ended lead pencils he knew how to make. The best thing I remember about Thoreau was Emerson's story. Emerson told how 'Henry' was jailed over night for refusing to pay poll tax—claimed all taxes were wrong, or something like that. Word was sent to Emerson in the morning; 'Henry' was in the lockup. Emerson, greatly upset, presented himself outside the cell; the two men faced each other with the bars between, Emerson exclaiming: 'Henry, why are you here?' Thoreau, hair all ruffled, alert, sleepless, resembling a defiant eaglet, or cockatoo, faced his benefactor; demanded: 'Waldo, why are you *not* here?' Good, wasn't it! Emerson chuckled himself, telling the story. That was Thoreau all over—anarchistically individualist."

"Whereas your *Leaves* is individualistically cosmic."

"Is it? I hope so, William. I hope you are right. My clear feeling was that I, Walt Whitman, must have something to say to and for any man or any woman. I must

be, to the fullest possible stretch, The Answerer. You remember that poem? ”

“ Remember! ” O’Connor quoted:

The gentleman of perfect blood acknowledges his perfect blood, The insulter, the prostitute, the angry person, the beggar, see themselves in the ways of him; he strangely transmutes them, They are not vile any more . . . they hardly know themselves, they are so grown.

“ Aye,” the poet assented. “ As for the *Children of Adam* poems, they are a necessary part of my avowed purpose to chant, first and always, ‘ the great Pride of man in himself.’ Sex, amativeness, yes, even animality has its due place in that all-embracing chant; though meanings that don’t usually go along with those words are behind all and will duly emerge, and though the whole subject is sought to be lifted into a new light and different atmosphere. To do away with long-cultivated shame, furtiveness of thought, sneaking pleasure, deliberate debasement of the natural senses, will be difficult, oh, formidably difficult! But I do believe we must accomplish it. If we are to have a superior race of men and women, healthy and well-begotten children, great natural persons and characters worthy of continental America, we must, *must* achieve a shifted attitude toward the thought and fact of sexuality; must accept it easily and without self-consciousness, naturally and *proportionally* as an element in character, personality, the emotions, and as a theme in literature or any of the arts.

“ Now, mind you, William,” Walt shook an earnest finger. “ I am not going to argue the question by itself, as Emerson wanted to. It does not stand by itself. The vitality of

it is altogether in its relations, bearings, significance. You can no more take it by itself than you can take the clef out of a symphony or the perspective out of a picture or the human body apart from the soul. To those who would exalt the soul and degrade the body in which it is presently enclosed, I say: 'What God hath joined, no man may put asunder!'"

"Walt, to hear you say that—to have something in me leap up and affirm it, in the face of the whole world if need be— Life holds not many such moments as this!"

Thirty years lit a torch from the beacon of forty-three.

2

The two men were sitting, this December of 1862, in O'Connor's home in the capital, Washington. For about a year the rolls of the Light House Bureau had carried O'Connor's name as a clerk; he had been for some years a husband and father. On this particular evening, the two young children being abed, Mrs. O'Connor had taken herself off to do some mending, leaving Walt and her husband to talk their hearts out. Now she appeared at the door, a newspaper in her hand.

"There's been a severe battle at Fredericksburg," were her words, as she came in to them. "Almost a disaster for us, I'm afraid."

O'Connor jumped up with an imprecation.

"And we've no more than got rid of McClellan!" he cried. "Now Burnside proves a man of straw! Fredericksburg! Lee's strongest position, of course; why couldn't we have attacked him anywhere else? Oh, the incompe-

tents! ” He seized the newspaper, running rapidly over the despatches. “ Burnside’s corps commanders appear all to have disagreed with him. Damn Burnside; for the matter of that, damn all his corps commanders! But there’s one man I’m sorry for: He’s the man at the end of Pennsylvania Avenue.”

“ The man in the White House ”—from Walt. And Mrs. O’Connor said, simply: “ Yes, Mr. Lincoln.”

A moment’s deep silence, and then Mrs. O’Connor asked:

“ It’s strange, isn’t it? how we are always thinking of him? I can’t explain it; but I know when anything goes terribly wrong—or splendidly right, either—I never seem to think about the general who did the work, or what the result will mean for or against us. I always find myself thinking anxiously of what it will mean to Mr. Lincoln. Perhaps that is just because he’s the President and has to bear the whole weight; but I don’t believe so. I’m sure I shouldn’t feel that special, almost tender, anxiety about Mr. Seward, or Mr. Chase, or Mr. Stanton. It must be the man himself. William is the same way and so, too, are you, Walt.”

“ The President,” said William O’Connor vehemently, “ is the only unmistakable human asset the North has got; I’ve said so before and I’ll say so now.”

“ The President’s an asset; most of the generals seem to be liabilities,” Walt admitted. “ I hope we’re still solvent. While we have Lincoln, I think we’ll stay solvent. This, William, is a man so great he shrinks several sizes all the people about him. I guess that’s back of our feeling? ” He turned inquiringly to Mrs. O’Connor. She nodded, but with

her head on one side, as if only partially accepting Walt's explanation. "William, little Philip's not so well to-night," she told her husband.

"What, is the boy-child sick?" Walt asked at once with the utmost concern.

"Vaccination against smallpox," declared the father in an angry voice. "At least, they'll never convince me it's anything else! Have you sent for the doctor?"—to the mother. Before she could answer, the doorbell answered for her. She hastened from the room, with: "That will be the doctor now" reaching them in a diminuendo.

"Go ahead, Walt, with what you were saying." But after a look at his friend's face, Walt said abruptly:

"No-no! Go to your wife, William; go to little Phil. I'll just sit here and glance over the news. I won't leave till I hear how he is."

O'Connor went out. Walt picked up the paper, but did not begin immediately to read it. For the moment he could not. He was the father and the mother, bending over the crib; he was something in the clutch of their joined hands, twined fingers, as fearfully they waited for what the physician would say. He was the delicate boy, in a still struggle with fever; he was the love of the parents fighting invisibly to ward off the peril of their son, and to comfort, to reassure each other. All this he was, because all this he felt. . . . After a little he picked up the newspaper, which had slipped to the floor.

On an inside page was a partial and confused, unalphabetized list of Federal wounded. Walt went slowly and carefully through the names of officers. Slowly and care-

fully . . . what did he expect? No, not expect . . . hope; and a negative hope, a hope not to find—

“Whitman, George, captain 51st Volunteers, seriously.”

In a subdivision headed “N. Y.” Walt’s hands, holding the spread newsprint, began to tremble. Oh, poor Mother! was his first clear thought.

The handsome O’Connor came quietly, quickly into the room. The look on his face was frenzied, the incomprehensible shadowed his fine eyes. Advancing on Walt, seizing him by the shoulder in a hurting grip, he whispered:

“Little Philip can’t . . . the doctor says we’re going to—lose him. Oh, dear God!”

“I’m struck at, too, William. Look!” And Walt showed the line of print.

“Your brother!”

“I must go out, must telegraph Mother in Brooklyn; then I’ll stop back. Probably I’ll not get to bed at all this night; in earliest morning I’ll be starting for Fredericksburg. Now go back to your wife, William, keep with her; keep with Philip’s mother!”

3

In the extreme disorder following Burnside’s bloody defeat, it took Walt three days and nights, with sleep in fugitive snatches only, to find George Whitman, described as struck in the face by the bursting of a shell and seriously wounded. When at length brother had found brother, the captain of volunteers was already recovering from injuries far less than had at first been supposed.

But the winding banks of the Rappahannock seemed, in

numberless tents and in almost every habitation, to be strewn with the hopeless, the frightfully wounded, the mutilated, the dying. Thousands . . . they were thousands. . . .

Death, like a reckless, largely-winning player for high stakes, seemed to be waiting nonchalantly for each spinning of the sun from dawn to dark; and at each spin carelessly to scoop in lives in huge handfuls. Death, with diseased talons, tore at the Army of the Potomac; the pawns in this desolating gamble were mutinous, worn out, despairing, afraid. All the corps commanders flung themselves on Burnside who had so appallingly blundered. Burnside persisted in blunder. It was understood that, in Washington, the Commander-in-Chief had asked Halleck for an opinion; and that Halleck in an access of futility had replied by offering to resign. Burnside was reported to be ready to resign; "Fighting" Joe Hooker was alternately resigning and declaring that the situation, both military and political, demanded a Dictator. Only Mr. Lincoln, it appeared, was not privileged to resign, or fly into a tantrum, or lose his head, or set up as a Dictator. . . .

On 21 December, 1862, Walt found himself outside a large brick mansion standing on the bank of the Virginian river which somebody—Burnside, Hooker or whomever it might fall to—would yet have to cross. At the foot of a tree, within thirty feet of the front entrance of the house, lay a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands . . . a full load for a one-horse cart. Near the heap lay several corpses, each covered with a brown woolen, or shoddy, blanket. In the dooryard, but nearer the river, were a number of fresh

graves. Walt examined these; they were mostly graves of officers marked by the name daubed on pieces of barrel staves or broken boards stuck in the dirt.

He went indoors. The house, facing the river, was a large house and a fine house. Upstairs and down it was packed with wounded. The inescapable impression, though quite unfounded, was that this residence had received only the worst cases. The men lay anywhere in their old clothes; all appeared unclean and bloody. Some cried out continually in pain, but a majority of the victims lay sleeping, or feigning sleep, or without stirring except for the twitch of eyes this way and that and the very slight movements of their mouths, chewing tobacco. For some reason, the act of chewing conferred on these a stronger appearance of stoical endurance than the rest bore; illusive, yet real; though actually they endured less austere, the cud easing them.

No order, no system, everything impromptu, no supplies.

"I expect it's the best that can be done," Walt muttered to himself.

His initial reaction to such sights and scenes had culminated in a wave of the intensest bitterness. He had mentally reviewed two earlier hours. The first of these was the April night when, after the close of a performance of an opera in Fourteenth street, New York, he had been walking down Broadway, on his way to Brooklyn. Midnight. A series of loud cries heralded the newsboys. They came tearing up the street, darting from side to side like frantic

swallows. A paper was thrust in his hand and the coin snatched from it. He crossed to stand under the great lamps that blazed in front of the Metropolitan Hotel—"Niblo's."

It was the attack on Sumter. A small crowd, perhaps thirty or forty persons, gathered. For the benefit of some who had no papers, one present read aloud the telegraphic despatch. There was great attention and perfect silence. People listened, looked at the pavement for a few minutes, and then moved away without speaking, like aimless particles on separate and unknown errands.

Again: first Bull Run. At daylight in a drizzle of rain which continued until dark, the defeated troops commenced pouring into Washington over the Long Bridge. It was the end of an unspeakable march of twenty miles. Dust, grime, smoke, sweated into their clothing in layers; rain soaking them down. At first sparsely, then thicker, these enervated and fatigued scarecrows appeared in the streets of the capital, appeared in Pennsylvania Avenue, and sank down on doorsteps or disposed themselves in the attitudes of extreme exhaustion in areaways and basement entrances. Their number was constantly recruited by fresh stragglers and disordered mobs. Rarely, oh, rarely! one saw incoming a regiment in perfect order, marching silently with lowering faces, stern, weary to sinking, all black and dirty . . . gaps in the line. . . . Two aged women, of very well known families, stood at an improvised table on the sidewalk, serving quartered loaves of bread and hot coffee in all that muddle and drizzle. . . . Willard's, the fashionable hotel, was thick,

crushed, creeping with shoulder-straps (*sneak, blow, put on airs there in Willard's sumptuous parlors and barrooms . . . I think this is your work. Where are your companies?*).

. . . These two earlier scenes, notably, came back to Walt as he stood on the lawn overlooking the Rappahannock. But the bitterness had gone from them; only a residue of remembered bitterness remained. The infinitely more concentrated scene about him—the heap of human refuse, the wretched graves, the torture house he had just quitted—had an effect quite different from anything else in these past twenty months. He felt, not bitter, but—heroic? At any rate, lifted clean out of himself, out of the war, out of the atmosphere of hatreds and passions, out (almost) of every ordinary relation, thought, preoccupation. Every usual emotion was caught up in the vast tide of fundamental feeling; not pity, but compassion—which means to “suffer with.” He suffered with all this, with all these, and it exalted him as he could not remember ever to have been exalted before.

Why? In what lay the difference? Should not the sheer, dreadful concentration of agony and death within a few feet of him have inspired a bitterness intenser than any he had felt at more diluted sights of human misery? Why did I feel so bitter then and now feel nothing of that at all? he asked himself. Was it not because, in what I then saw, as in Washington after first Bull Run, I *saw* but could *do* nothing? The intuitive, repressed feeling of *helplessness* distilled the gall of my thoughts. But now—*now!*—there is no such intuition to be kept back, trod under. *Now* I know I can help.

Help! A pitiful handful, perhaps. Curiously, the thought of how small the help can be does not disturb; and the certitude I feel of helping—how that raises me up! If I can cheer one fellow I may be the means of saving his life. . . . What are my own words? *A man is a summons and challenge.*

I must answer.

. . . He turned, reëntered the house; spoke to the man nearest the door and continued, visiting each of the wounded throughout the mansion. With some he talked only, to one he gave newspapers asked for, for several he wrote letters to their folks at home.

I must have something to give, other days, he thought as he emerged toward sundown. Something, anything, even if it's only an apple or a bite off a plug of tobacco. How their faces lit! They need me, need me! (Perhaps I need them.) They shall have me, all of me—all, all!

4

(Perhaps I need them.)

Beginning with this first day, Walt resolved to keep notes of some of the things he heard and saw. He would, in impromptu jottings with a pencil, brief "cases," persons, occurrences by bedsides. For this purpose, two or three sheets of paper, folded small to pocket-size, the folds slit and fastened with a pin, served well enough. These soiled and creased, sometimes bloodstained, livraisons, or booklets, might some day be useful.

December 23 to 31.—The results of the late battle are exhibited everywhere about here in thousands of cases (hun-

dreds die every day), in the camp, brigade, and division hospitals. These are merely tents and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs, or small leaves. No cots; seldom even a mattress. It is pretty cold. The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop with him for hours, if he wishes it.

I wonder why I feel such a strong love for these youngsters? was Walt's meditation as he wrote this. It is just as strong as the fellow-love I used to feel, when a youth, for other youths; for any handsome or affectionate-appearing boy of my own years, even a stranger. The feeling I have tried to utter in the *Calamus* poems; it shocks many. Yet just that feeling, active or latent, is the base of any approach to an ideal society, to human brotherhood. The love of comrades—just that. Boys quite commonly feel it; men seem to think they must be ashamed of such a feeling. Love, affection, for adults, must be from one sex to the other. Or from father toward son, or from mother toward daughter. But I do not feel that restriction. I wonder why? I wonder!

True it is, when I sit beside one of these boy soldiers of twenty-one or younger (many younger), it lies in the back of my thought that this boy, or a boy as lovable as this, might be my own joyfully-recognized son if . . . if Esther . . . but I know that thought is only a thread inter-

woven in my whole feeling. The main flow of my feeling is further back—at least as far back as adolescence and maybe farther. Is it possible that it derives from my dear mother? and if so, how? She has always been the loveliest woman in the knowledge of many women. . . .

*The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the suppertable,
The mother with mild words . . . clean her cap and gown . . .
a wholesome odor falling off her person and clothes as she
walks by.*

And this also is she:

Behold a woman!

*She looks out from her Quaker cap . . . her face is clearer and
more beautiful than the sky.*

*She sits in an armchair under the shaded porch of the farmhouse,
The sun just shines on her old white head.*

Her ample gown is of creamhued linen. . . .

I have always, since first-remembered childhood, nearly worshiped my mother. I used to think that perhaps more of her entered into me than of my father; him I loved and yet, with us young children, his hasty temper made him sometimes formidable. . . . Though her silence would conceal it, I suspect my dear mother powerfully defended us from Father, powerfully and secretly willed that I, in especial, should love her. . . . Can it be that I inherited, by her determination or otherwise, a major portion of her affectional nature? Perhaps, largely, I am the creature of her Wish, of her deep, deep, not clearly formulated Wish; perhaps I love her because she is the greater part of me; perhaps I love those young men whom, had they been fleshed and about her in younger days, she would have loved. . . . I wonder!

Something there is that links spirit to spirit, parent to

child, even as the body of mother and child are joined; why could it not be the secret Wish—for so I should prefer calling the invisible connection. That must have been what lay implicit in my mind when I wrote several of the lines in the poem, *There Was a Child Went Forth*—the lines:

*His own parents,
He that had father'd him, and she that had conceiv'd him in her
womb, and birth'd him,
They gave this child more of themselves than that. . . .*

For sure it is, if the physical and mental inheritance were all, we could predict everything concerning the child except the sex, and once he or she was born, the future body and exact intelligence would be knowable. Yet, never were men and women like that. Oh, I wonder!

What either flowers forth or struggles to flower forth is the secret Wish, rooted in primitive sex, visible only as budding or blossoming emotion. I think, with due study and after long examination without prejudice as to "good" and "evil" (for we must go far into the hinterland where the mind is as yet irresponsible and "good" and "evil" exist not yet)—I think we shall find how literally right was Shakespeare when he declared: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." I, for example: Maybe I am nothing but the stuff of my mother's girlish dreams of young lovers. . . . Innocent, I; and equally innocent, she; the real stuff of Life, the Wish and not the Word, has been, for a passing instant, bodied forth in her . . . then in myself. . . .

This would explain much; and to complete the explanation but one detail more is needed. How does the Wish seek to clothe itself? for the disembodied Wish is always

seeking to clothe itself in a form of flesh. It seeks that other one, is forever asking of every person met: Are you the New Person drawn toward me? Which is only a shy way of asking: Are you the New Person who will draw me and, for a time less or longer, house me? And the answer is read, or tends to be read, almost instantaneously in . . . faces.

Faces! We make them answer. I did well when I wrote the poem about faces—wrought perhaps more truly than I knew.

The pure, extravagant, yearning, questioning artist's face;

The ugly face of some beautiful Soul . . .

The sacred faces of infants, the illumined face of the mother of many children;

The face of an amour, the face of veneration . . .

The face withdrawn of its good and bad, a castrated face. . . .

This now is too lamentable a face for a man;

Some abject louse, asking leave to be—cringing for it;

Some milknosed maggot, blessing what lets it wrig to its hole.

This face of a healthy honest boy is the program of all good. This was my Wish (or, if you like, my mother's Wish, or my mother's mother's Wish) constantly and keenly observing, penetrating, reviewing, rejecting, accepting. Walt, did you know you were like that? I order myself: Let the buried Wish stand up clear and face it boldly . . . the while I wonder.

5

Besides the hospitals, I also go occasionally on long tours through the camps, talking with the men, etc. Sometimes at night among the groups around the fires, in their shebang enclosures of bushes. These are curious shows, full of characters and groups. I soon get acquainted anywhere in camp, with officers or men. . . .

Christmas Eve, '62. The half-dozen men, Walt one of them, were yarning around the bonfire. The brush palisade isolated them from all the world, leaving them alone with each other, with their tiny fire, and with the far, frosty stars.

"I was married two years ago this night," said suddenly a young Vermonter, breaking a short silence. "We've a boy, 'bout a year old. Counting some on seeing him the first time, I be."

"Our first's a year old, exactly, this night," mildly boasted a Pennsylvanian. "Born on Christmas Eve. Girl."

A pause.

"If the President don't put Joe Hooker in command of this army, Jeff Davis will be playin' Santa Claus to us all in Andersonville next Christmas." The pessimist, an older man, emptied his pipe with loud taps on the heel of his shoe—a shoe consisting of a heel and a hole. He looked disgustedly at the hole. "See that!"

"Goin' to hang up your stockin', Lem, I s'pose?"

"Stockin'! Who says I got a stockin'? I got some-thin' I put on my foot either end up; makes no diff'rence. I got a pair of anklets, that's what I got."

"Ne' mind, Lem. We're on our way to a warmer climate!"

At this there was a general laugh.

"What I can't see," complained the man who had been rallying Lem, "is how old Abe in Washin'ton figgers on gettin' *anybody* fit t' command this here army agin Lee—now Little Mac's been retired."

"Huh! 'Little Mac'!" countered Lem with a growl. "Some of you fellers 'll never git it out 'f your heads that

there ain't any gineral but McClellan! McClellan never *moved*—an' ef you ask my opinion, I don't think he *wanted* to whip Lee, leastways he didn't want to very hard."

"Hol' on!" "What call you got t' say that, Lem?" Debate sputtered, like bacon in the frying-pan; at moments the speeches had an acrid flavor, as if some of the fat were spilling in the fire.

"Can any of you fellers sing?"

Walt's clear, resonant question, in a hearty voice, brought a surprised stoppage of talk. Several answered, rather irresolutely:

"Sing? Well, y-a-a-s!"

"I useter sing t' home."

"Only tune I know is 'John Brown's Body.'"

"I was thinking of some Christmas music," Walt explained. "Guess you all know one or two things—'While Shepherds Watched' and the like o' that. . . ."

They did; enough, at any rate, knew the tunes—scarcely the words. They sang, then, the tunes, repeating over and over the few remembered words. In the sharp air of a Virginia winter's night the uncertain but powerful voices of this handful of men astonished the occupants of neighboring shebangs. The familiar hymn tunes were caught up at other bivouacs and nucleating bonfires. A wavering, tremulous chain of singing spread up and down the involuted banks of the dark river. Mysteriously, one was aware of the ragged Army of the Potomac as having a collective, enunciabile soul. Instinctively, one's eye searched the heaven for the portent of the Star. *Adeste, fideles! Laeti, triumphantes . . .*

Far up and down the bloodied banks of the winding river, far into the miraculous Night, extended the singing.

6

Early in the new year, eighty-fifth year of These States, Walt found himself leaving camp at Falmouth, Virginia, and accompanying wounded men by rail and by boat to Washington. The rail journey, on the Aquia Creek Railroad, was made with the injured men piled in careful, close rows on flat cars—"platform cars" as they were called. The start was an hour before sunrise, but the sun was up before the train had completed the dozen miles of track. Sentries with rumpled hair and half-awake look, cavalry camps in the distance, were the only diversion on the journey. On reaching Aquia Creek Landing, more wounded were found waiting. At length all were got aboard the government steamer, which proceeded up the Potomac.

Walt found himself constantly busy. "Only trouble is," he explained humorously to a boy who held tight to his hand, "there ain't enough of me to go 'round. Son, that fellow over there wants me to write a letter to his mother. I'll stop back." Reluctantly the fingers let him go.

Dear Madam: This is a letter from your son, Charles, written hastily on a Government boat by a friend of your son and of other soldiers. Charles was hit in the leg and side at Fredericksburg that eventful Saturday, 13th of December. He lay the succeeding two days and nights helpless on the field, between the city and terraces of batteries; his company and regiment had been compell'd to leave him to his fate. To make matters worse, it happen'd he lay with

his head slightly downhill, and could not help himself. At the end of some fifty hours he was brought off, with other wounded, under a flag of truce. I ask him how the rebels treated him as he lay during those two days and nights within reach of them—whether they came to him—whether they abused him? He answers that several of the rebels, soldiers and others, came to him at one time and another. A couple of them, who were together, spoke roughly and sarcastically, but nothing worse. One middle-aged man, however, who seem'd to be moving around the field, among the dead and wounded, for benevolent purposes, came to him in a way he will never forget; treated Charles kindly, bound up his wounds, cheer'd him, gave him a couple of biscuits and a drink of whiskey and water; asked him if he could eat some beef. This good secesh, however, did not change Charles's position, for it might have caused the blood to burst from the wounds, clotted and stagnated. Charles has had a pretty severe time; has been carefully tended for the past fortnight and is now in shape to be mov'd on this short trip up the Potomac to Washington. There you will hear from him in a day or two more, telling you what hospital he is in, etc. If possible I shall keep track of him and write myself; if I lose track, will surely find him in a few days at the outside, and meanwhile you will probably have been notified his whereabouts. Charles sends his love and I can add, sitting here and talking with him, seeing him smile, that he retains a good heart, and is at present on the gain. (It is not uncommon for the men to remain on the field this way, one, two, or even four or five days.)

W. W.

7

All Washington seemed to be slowly converting into a hospital. There were the Eighth Street, the Armory Square, the Campbell, the H Street, and even the Patent Office was being utilized. In three very large apartments on the second story of the spreading building devoted to Invention, wounded men were niche'd in close rows. Laid in the narrow, deep lateral openings between high and ponderous glass cases crowded with models, the badly hurt and dying men, with emaciated faces and unmoving bodies, gave an impression of still unresurrected mortals entombed in an elaborate sarcophagus and accompanied, like the Egyptian dead, by propitiatory gifts, bizarre and costly, intricate, hideous and beautiful. At night the blare of gas-lights lit up for them and for the transfixed, appalled visitor delicate articulations, in wood and metal, of every kind of utensil or machine it had entered the mind of man to conceive; the wildest visions of insane conjecture were suddenly thrown into relief as embodied realities, and the lucid simplicities of genius were exposed in their three-dimensional and triumphant perfection. Look! Here is what Man has wrought! Here in the case of polished and gleaming glass, here on the rumpled bed-cot. . . .

This effect of the scene upon the imaginative mind, greater probably than any designed scheme could have achieved, was not reproduced in the thoughts, curiosities and passing preoccupations of those who lay in the improvised and wholly temporary hospital. Imaginative minds are thankfully few. A wounded soldier able to turn his head and

study the astounding contraption enthroned beside his bed, asked Walt:

“Friend, what air thet? Read me the label.”

Walt made the circuit of the glass case, reporting:

“It’s a perpetual-motion machine—anyway, that’s what Oscar Terwilliger of Catamount, Kentucky, meant it to be.”

“Won’t it go?”

“Why, yes; I guess so. Trouble is, it stops.”

“Oh, I see. When y’ don’t want it to.”

“Aim was, for it never to stop.”

“Whut, never? Who’d want an injin he couldn’t stop? Quit foolin’ me. . . .”

Walt spent a while explaining the utility of perpetual motion, if it could be arrived at. The soldier was unconvinced. For example, Walt instanced a clock that would never need winding. But the other only declared he wouldn’t have such a clock around.

“A clock that ’d never run down ’d give me the creep-an’-crawl. . . . I’d wake up in the night, get out o’ bed and go downstairs, light the lamp, look at the clock to see ef it hadn’t struck work. . . . We don’t want nothin’ ’at goes on forever.”

“Mebbe not. Mebbe—not!” Something in the thought struck on something in Walt.

Forever! No, we didn’t want anything that went on forever. We didn’t want life, or death, or even love that would last . . . forever. Why? In anything that endured forever there was an implied changelessness. The thing eternal was the thing without growth. And growth alone

was the memorable ecstasy. Not to live unchanging, like a stone, but to grow. . . .

8

To grow!

One day Walt saw a copy of a letter just written (26 January, 1863) to General Hooker. It ran:

“General: I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. . . Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skilful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm; but I think that during General Burnside’s command of the army you have taken counsel of your ambition and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that

the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the army, of criticizing their commander and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can to put it down. Neither you nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army while such a spirit prevails in it; and now beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance go forward and give us victories.

“A. LINCOLN.”

The golden-haired, cherub-countenanced young man who showed the copy of this letter to Walt was John Hay, one of Mr. Lincoln's secretaries, and one of several warmly enthusiastic, admiring youths who were drawn first to the author of *Leaves of Grass*, and, irresistibly thereafter, to the personality of, not the poet indeed, but the man Walt Whitman. “The two Johns,” Walt was already in the habit of saying, affectionately jesting, of John Hay and John Burroughs; and then, with a glance at O'Connor who was usually present, “and the *one* William.” For he felt—they all did—that about O'Connor there was something (manner, magnetism, wit?) perishable, perhaps, but incomparable.

Finishing, Walt struck the letter with his hand, exclaiming:

“He grows! John, doesn't it daily amaze, awe, almost scare you—you who see him constantly—to observe him growing? Can't you figure out his secret? capture the recipe? Year ago, we had a President who was patiently trying to hit upon a way to handle McClellan; laboriously

setting out to teach an old dog new tricks or, at least, make him perform his old ones. A patient, awkward man among the animals! Now, what? We have a gentle but indomitable master. Not a bully, not a man with a whip! No slave-driver, no overseer, no cunning and crafty politician to whom men are puppets pulled by wires. But a man, big, big! with overshadowing height, farthest-spreading shoulders, and instantly-sensed, quickly-obeyed, powerfulest mind. By God, John! such a man, once in hundreds of years, is all the advance of civilization, the one step forward we are able to take! ”

“ I want you to meet him. I want to fix it, some day,” said Hay, eagerly.

“ Meet him? ” Walt shook with the heartiness of his laughter. “ I’ve already met him. Eh? You know what I mean! Only way to meet a man like Mr. Lincoln is to *grasp* him. The puny, the little-minded, never can. How many, do you suppose, who shake his hand and say something *meet* him? . . . But I hope to do that, of course, some day. If you fix it, you spoil it; accomplish nothing. Highly-purposed, it will come. . . .”

9

Though the third edition of his *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1860, was far ampler than the volume that the great Emerson had saluted so prophetically in 1855, Walt had known from the beginning of the secession war how far from final the book of 1860 must be. In intervals of his work among the wounded he was busy with thoughtful revisions of his book. The changes, on the whole, were

not many; often he would scratch out words, writing in others, only to cross out the emendation and restore the first phrasing. At this intermittent task few ever caught him; but the angel-faced John Hay, stealing an hour from secretarial duties, was one of the detective few.

Bits, scraps of paper were scattered all over the small deal table at which Walt pensively sat; loose sheets of paper littered the floor and had drifted into corners of the room; they were so numerous that their imperceptible individual thinnesses formed visible thicknesses and made the floor an uneven surface to walk on. Uneven and slippery; John Hay, treading with no special care, felt his feet fly suddenly from under him and sat down with a bang which made the room shake.

"John! Is that the way you go about the White House?" asked the poet, looking up with a start.

"You're an untidy beast, Walt," grumbled the youngster, getting up and cautiously feeling posterior parts. "I suppose it comes of working in a newspaper office, this mess." He surveyed the room. "What are you fussing with? Is it a new poem?"

"There *are* no new poems. . . . No, I've been tinkering with my *Poem of Many in One*. It will want some alterations. A new commencement:

*As I sat alone, by blue Ontario's shore,
As I mused of these mighty days . . .*

Then, throughout, slight, significant changes absorbing into it the lessons of these years of war."

"'By blue Ontario's shore,'" repeated John Hay. "That's very musical, very evocative, altogether lovely!

For a bit like that, it seems to me the poets of strict meter and delicate riming might forgive you something."

"Scarcely, John, scarcely! A wrong may be forgiven; but to forgive a difference is not so easy. Custom, habit! The world forges its own shackles; let every one wear them! But this poem: Year after my book first appeared, I wove much of the prose preface to the first *Leaves* into this *Poem of Many in One*. More must now be interwoven. I have written this, to go in at some place:

*(Angry cloth I saw there leaping!
I stand again in leaden rain, your flapping folds saluting;
I sing you over all, flying, beckoning through the fight—O the
hard-contested fight!
O the cannons ope their rosy-flashing muzzles! the hurtled balls
scream!
The battle-front forms amid the smoke—the volleys pour in-
cessant from the line;
Hark! the ringing word, Charge!—now the tussle, and the furious
maddening yells;
Now the corpses tumble curl'd upon the ground,
Cold, cold in death, for precious life of you,
Angry cloth I saw there leaping.)*

Tell me, is it good? Do you embrace it, John? Or is it flawed? "

"It seems to me perfect. That phrase for the flag—'angry cloth'!—and the pounce of the verb, 'leaping'! The antithesis in the next to the last line, also; where you say: 'Cold in *death*, for precious *life* of you.' . . . But the best thing of all is the way the eye is sent to the flag, which is made to seem a thing alive, then carried to the battlefield and then drawn back again to the flag, to the symbol for which men are dying."

"In this passage here, I aim to add two lines. The part about individuals.

Underneath all, individuals!

The American compact is altogether with individuals . . .

I think somewhere in here, to enforce the point with a sharp and memorable illustration, I will add:

*(Mother! with subtle sense severe—with the naked sword in your hand,
I saw you at last refuse to treat but directly with individuals.)*

That seems to me just the thrust, just the reminder needed out of the personal experience of us all."

"Yes, but do you realize that it is beautifully, exquisitely cadenced poetry? That the greatest poet that ever lived, in his most magnificent moment, couldn't have achieved anything finer than the choice and balance of words in that single line? 'Mother . . . subtle sense severe . . . naked sword . . . hand.'"

"John, hush! You praise as excessively as William."

"The thought is historically true," continued Hay, reflectively. "I mean the thought that we are treating only with individuals. Of course, in our view, the Confederacy doesn't exist; a civil rebellion on the part of certain individuals, persons, exists; a rebellion on the part of some civil governments, individual States, exists. For a poet, you are an unusually good statesman!"

"Spell it with a capital 'S,' John; make it two words linked with an apostrophe. I am a States' Man, above all—the poet has always come afterward with me."

"Only the other day," Hay was saying, "Mr. Lincoln came again upon that favorite phrase in army orders about 'driving the invader from our soil.' It made him despair, as it always does, and he exclaimed: 'Will our generals

never get that idea out of their heads? The whole country is our soil.' ”

“ So it is, so it is! But it takes a clear vision like the President's not to lose the perception in such a time as this. Hay, watch your man closely; study him; memorize his slightest gesture; treasure up the unconsidered trifles of his talk. You are living with a man who is as great as any the world has ever seen; I know, feel so! Greater than Napoleon, I am sure; greater than Cromwell; greater than the Cæsars or the Charlemagnes of misty memory. Realize this; realize also that this man is not known (if indeed he ever can fully be known) to his people or to other peoples. But some day he must be known; perhaps, yes probably, it will devolve most heavily upon you to tell the world about him—you who have been with him constantly, are now, night and day. And to discharge your task, you must have known, must have comprehended him, yourself, in all his immensity, variety, resource, bravery. Even then you may not be able to make the world understand . . . but you will have done something to make the world understand; you will have served humanity well—oh, well! ”

“ I'd ask nothing larger, Walt, than just this chance to be with him, watch him, and learn what I can.”

After Hay had gone, Walt continued amid the litter to work at the modification of the poem, one of his longer ones. For a while, after repeated perusals and a period of motionless reflection, he did nothing but draw his pencil again and again through certain lines, adding nothing in place of what he crossed out. Eventually eleven lines had dwindled to five, which read:

*O I see now, flashing, that this America is only you and me,
Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
Its crimes, lies, thefts, defections, slavery, are you and me,
Its Congress is you and me—the officers, capitols, armies, ships,
are you and me,
Its endless gestations of new States are you and me . . .*

The concluding line reminded him that certainly within a few weeks or months West Virginia would be admitted as a State of the Union; this despite the agony of destructive civil war; and in the remote reaches of the Far West was the Territory of Nevada, already pressing for Statehood. . . . How wonderful that in the midst of this crisis and struggle the Union could still go on, expanding, renewing itself. . . .

A great surge of feeling swept Walt. And suddenly, with the utmost vividness and distinctness, he remembered a dream of his youth, a dream of being somewhere in a neutral, misty region and at a little distance there sat a creature enthroned. . . .

He knew she was a woman, but whom he could not tell, and her face was hidden, turned away from him. As he regarded her speechlessly, for how long a time he could not have told, slowly her head turned toward him and her face shone upon him.

The effect, instant and terrible, had been that he had flung himself on the ground at her feet, with shaking hands that caught the hem of her robe and drew it to his twisting lips. He did this conscious only of an irresistible and overwhelming impulsion from within, as if the pure and beneficent light of an immortal countenance had struck into his soul and set it free in a realm of ether lit by a single glance. . . . He had seen her face as one sees the sun and could not bear to look upon it. He could only know

that she shone upon him kindly; could only know, sense her to be a Woman. . . .

This he had dreamed. . . . West Virginia; far Nevada. . . .

The pencil moved steadily over a blank sheet of paper. He read the result aloud.

*(Democracy! while weapons were everywhere aim'd at your breast,
I saw you serenely give birth to immortal children—saw in dreams
your dilating form;
Saw you with spreading mantle covering the world.)*

10

He wore his haversack over his shoulder and as he went from bed to bed they turned their heads, or lifted them, showing pale, frightened, smiling, or sick and beseeching faces; they drank in his approach as if it were a healing odor like balsam liberated in the hospital's close air. And, pausing at every bedside, Walt unshouldered the huge coil that was his burden, diving into it for some gift. . . . For one, an orange; for another, a little box of writing paper; here he gave a small sheet of postage stamps and for the next man there were two home newspapers. To many he also gave tobacco; a little jar of raspberries came to light for the sixteen-year-old boy whose leg had been taken off below the knee. The next patient required, not a reach within the haversack, but a hand slipped in a coat pocket; from which was duly extracted and quietly pressed into a reluctant palm a small sum of money. The soldier reddened; his wrist resisted; then, as the color ebbed from his face, with averted eyes, his fingers closed tightly over the coins. He finally said, in a very low voice:

"I hadn't a cent. I—"

"I sent the word—a telegraphic message. Then I sat down and wrote her, to make sure, not to come on, as you will surely get well."

"I—I—"

"Don't try to say it. Mind, your throat! We'll talk next week, when it's rested. . . ."

As almoner of others, Walt appeared to have the illimitable resources of a Santa Claus. He stopped in the aisle, remarking to himself:

"Lord 'a' massey! Looks to me as if I'd enough stuff to go through the next ward entire."

Figs and sweet crackers "stretched out." A packet of stamped envelopes went around easily; one apiece and three left over; these given extra on a show of hands requesting them. This ward of the Campbell Hospital was being cleaned up and all the men were receiving clean clothes. Much fun reigned among the men dressing or being dressed, with naked chests and bare feet and a great tossing to and fro of shirts, underwear and even pillows.

In the afternoon, Walt pilgrimaged to Armory Square Hospital. There was a disagreeable case, perforation of the bladder by a bullet, which he had on his mind from the day before. In spite of the disheartening circumstances, this fellow was of cheerful mind; he is a handsome boy, Walt thought, as he stood beside the bed. Yes . . . a bright face. The almoner fetched out a stick of horehound candy.

The lad was delighted. He sucked a little, remarking: "This'll be good for my bad throat."

Down the aisle a group of surgeons and nurses were congregating. From the neighborhood of a fearful wound in a fearful condition some loose splinters of bone were being removed. This tedious operation seemed to Walt to be performed with great tenderness, and, once it was fairly under way, the soldier, propped up in bed, bore it with uncomplaining silence. *Much wasted*, noted Walt in one of his jottings. *Had lain a long time quiet in one position (not for days only but weeks), a bloodless, brown-skinn'd face, with eyes full of determination—belong'd to a New York regiment. . . .* Not far away a wife sat by the side of her husband, dangerously ill with typhoid. In the next ward, a mother sat with her son. *She tells me she has seven children, and this is the youngest. (A fine, kind, healthy, gentle mother, good-looking, not very old, with a cap on her head, and dress'd like home—what a charm it gave to the whole ward.) I liked the woman nurse in ward E—I noticed how she sat a long time by a poor fellow who just had, this morning, in addition to his other sickness, bad hemorrhages—she gently assisted him, reliev'd him of the blood, holding a cloth to his mouth, as he coughed it up—he was so weak he could only just turn his head over on the pillow.*

But the many of them! Page after page of Walt's little improvised booklets was needed for the barest record of names, regiments, condition of the wounded and an abbreviated note of a man's home folks. Marcus Small, Company K, Seventh Maine; dysentery and typhoid; talks of being able soon to visit his people in East Livermore (speaks in a feeble voice—I hold his hand and do most of the talking). Thomas Lindly, First Pennsylvania Cavalry; shot

very badly through the foot; has to be constantly dosed with morphine;—*his face ashy and glazed, bright young eyes; I give him a large handsome apple, lay it in sight, tell him to have it roasted in the morning, as he generally feels easier then, and can eat a little breakfast. I write two letters for him.* . . . An old Quaker lady sitting by the side of her son, Amer Moore, Second U. S. Artillery, shot in the head two weeks since, from hips down paralyzed. . . . Thirty wide four-horse wagons used as ambulances pass up Fourteenth Street on the way to Columbian, Carver and Mount Pleasant Hospitals. Hospitals; everywhere new hospitals. . . . Nine-tenths of the soldiers, at least, are native-born, and all so young. Fifteen to twenty-one, not many but *most* of them. And the Southerners seem to be even younger or to have, in proportion, more very young boys. . . .

To emanate ordinary cheer, to radiate physical magnetism, to have and to preserve poise and aplomb and presence, was, Walt found, the principal prescription. . . . One must be a great lover, one must be a strong, unswervable believer—in what? In God? No doubt. In men? Of course. In life? Yes, in life. In death. In death, too. . . . Not nursing nor medicines nor delicacies nor gifts of money nor anything else did so much good as the putting-forth of a sense of health and a sense of love, compassionate and impassioned, strengthening and ardent, always sincere. . . . He was himself at this time blessed with perfect health; exercise made him robust and the companionship of friends made him happy. Before starting on one of his morning or afternoon or evening tours (they were likely to last four

or five hours apiece, and sometimes longer) Walt soon grew careful to start well-rested. Well-rested, bathed, cleanly clad in fresh, sweet-smelling clothes; cheerful after a good meal; inspired with a feeling of something not material, something impalpable, something quite resistless . . . to give . . .

II

“ You haven’t told me your name, Son.”

“ Hippolyte. Hippolyte Antoine.”

Hippolyte Antoine . . . Hippolyte. . . .

“ You’re pretty badly hurt, but doing well, Hippolyte. You look cheerful, look like getting well! ”

“ I can’t get well. Doctor says he can make me comfortable, though. So . . . I reckon I’m all right.”

Gunshot wounds in the abdomen. Delayed, transferred case from Fredericksburg. Hippolyte . . . Hippolyte *Antoine!*

The clear February sunlight streamed in the windows; the ward was almost a solarium; and in the midst of this pale, ethereal brightness lay a curious black spot. Every nerve in Walt’s body carried directive messages from and to the brain, like a tangle of strung telegraph wires crowded with hurrying orders and counter-orders on the eve of battle. He said quietly:

“ Isn’t there something I can give you, Hippolyte—something I can get for you, do for you? ”

“ Yes, please. If you’d write a short letter to my sister, Floride, in New Orleans.”

It had come. The black spot expanded suddenly. Then it vanished, leaving a curious ringing noise in the ears;

and all about lay the clear February sunlight and within hand's reach lay a twenty-seven-year-old, peacefully dying.

A supreme effort.

"All right, Hippolyte. I'm ready."

"*'Dear Floride,'*" dictated the brother, "*'a visitor to this hospital is writing for me. I am in Armory Square Hospital, Washington, and very comfortable—feel drowsy just now and unable to write much. Am well-used here and there is nothing to worry about. I'*"—a slight hesitation; then the voice went evenly on—" *'shall soon be all right. I wanted you to know, and I hope you are all right, too. Have heard some black stories about things in New Orleans since its capture last year; not hearing from you, have been often anxious but have trusted you were all the while safe and well and fairly provided for. Many Yanks I have met were good-hearted people, though having different manners; a little hard to get used to them and know them. If you get this letter you might try writing me. The Virginia Randolphs can perhaps help, my friend Eustis Randolph's family, if you need anything. I am, with much love,*

"Your brother,

"HIPPOLYTE.'"

The pencil took a moment longer to catch up, at the close.

"All right, Hippolyte."

"Mme. Floride Dumouriez—D-u-m-o-u-r-i-e-z, Maison Dumouriez, Royal Street, New Orleans."

Walt repeated the address. He seemed to himself to

whisper it, but the young man beside him, soothed by morphia, caught or thought he caught the repetition satisfactorily. He said, "That's . . . correct"; the lids dropped gently over his eyes, and remained there, as if curtaining the placid flow of his thoughts. . . .

With the still unfolded letter in his hand, Walt sat and gave no outward evidence of a frightful struggle within him. Should he add a few words on this letter which might be read by this boy's sister? Oh, Floride! . . . oh, how pitiful! . . . he remembered her own wrung words of anguished acceptiveness:

"Il faut . . . il faut . . . souffrir."

The surprising, deep vibrancy of her voice in pronouncing the word "suffer." One had to suffer. . . .

"It is my turn to suffer," he whispered to himself. Ah! let me suffer; let me not throw off any of it on her.

He folded the letter; moistened the flap of the envelope; sealed. His glance, as he rose to go, fell for one last instant on that only living relative of Floride when he had known her—how many years ago? Fifteen. And she had been lonely, then. Fifteen years. Now she loses this boy. But perhaps she has lost the capacity any longer to suffer. . . . *Floride!*

The young brother of Floride Dumouriez, after lingering under heavy dosage of morphia for three days, died without ever again regaining the lucid clearness of mind which might have permitted him to answer the questions Walt yearned to ask him. Yearned to ask, yet dreaded to ask;

would certainly have asked though assured that the answers could yield him nothing. It is not certain, thought Walt, I should feel anything, no matter what he could tell me. . . . The strong river of feeling scours continually new channels; deserts the old ones and never returns to them; and now all the rush of my love spreads itself out over the wide plain of these thousands who are hurt and dying. In its tiniest ripple, it would creep out and reach them all. . . .

For better, for worse (though who shall pronounce what is better and what is worse?) I am not as other men and women. Something there is in me which prevents a final concentration of feeling. I guess the true channel was obstructed, fatally snagged; I guess that could I at twenty-one have had the love of Esther Terry, all would have been different. Denied a sufficient outlet, the river in me has traveled subterraneously jetting up in places far apart and expending itself on objects great and little. It has watered the roots of things, it has even tried to moisten every inch of a continent and manifest itself to every inhabitant of These States; it has grown leaves of grass.

But of the effect on individual lives I am not so sure. To whom can I point and say: He owes me something? Or: She owes me something? Look back to those early Long Island days and ask if the boy Joel Skidmore owed me anything or the boy Selah Mulford. What had I to do with Joel compared with his Jenny, or with Selah compared with his Sarah? I guess it is too little for any comparative reckoning—a spark of feeling, not anything beyond the spark. I served them no more than the chance words,

or maybe the preordained words, of Herman Melville and Margaret Fuller served me. Poor Joel, killed in the Mexican War! and poor Selah, dead at first Bull Run! Poor? A foolish, a wicked word; they were not poor; it is I who have been secretly poor. To be poor is to have riches and to be denied the squandering of them, the lavishing forth of them on a supremely-loved other person, to have to fling them chancily all about, seed wasted on stony acres. . . . Melville, whom I heard utter the bitterness of one with the cup of frustration pressed to his lips, has lived and lives yet to enjoy satisfactions rich and deep. These satisfactions, or ones yet greater, Margaret Fuller also knew, she and her young lover-husband, in death not parted. How well I remember her moving letter to her brother Eugene, which I read in New Orleans! How, oh, how much I would give to have known Margaret then and thereafter! To have been with her in the Roman hospitals, to have observed her in the rustic village of Rieti with the child in her arms, to have seen her, if only from the bleak shore, when she met death in that shipwreck off Long Island . . . my own Paumanok, sounding sea and white sands and mutable sky. "The life of thought . . . and the life of action."

Well, I have exchanged the life of thought for the life of action, have I not? Or perhaps it is that I now lead parallel lives. But if I had to choose, knowing what I know now, I would be the wound-dresser at the sacrifice of being the poet. The only reality, to such souls as Margaret Fuller and myself and certain others, is in what we feel. That which excites our feeling is real—or rather,

the feeling is real and therefore the thing which causes it. And so I say: No reality approaches this ministration to the sick and dying. No reality except one . . . long ago . . . lost.

Lost? No! No! I clutch it with my hands, lash it fast with my heartstrings; have never lost, can never . . . lose or loose it. Esther! You were some part of me; flesh and blood and spirit; a caress that was also a branding; a kiss that was also a sword; an embrace . . . I feel yet; a look which, like the lilac, flowers forever.

13

Dear madam, Walt began on a fresh sheet of paper, after spoiling his first trial. No doubt you and Peter's friends have heard the sad fact of his death in hospital here, through his uncle, or the lady from Cincinnati, who took his things. (I have not seen them, only heard of them visiting Peter.) I will write you a few lines—as a casual friend that sat by his death-bed. Your son, Corporal Peter A. Jackson, was wounded at Chancellorsville May 1, 1863—the wound was in the left knee, pretty bad. He was sent up to Washington, was receiv'd in ward C, Armory-square hospital, May 8th—the wound became worse, and on the 13th of May the leg was amputated a little above the knee—the operation was perform'd by Dr. Bliss, one of the best surgeons in the army—he did the whole operation himself—there was a good deal of bad matter gather'd—the bullet was found in the knee. For a couple of weeks afterwards Peter was doing pretty well. I visited and sat by him frequently, as he was fond of having me. The last ten or twelve days of May I

saw that his case was critical. He previously had some fever, with cold spells. The last week in May he was much of the time flighty—but always mild and gentle. He died first of June. The actual cause of death was pyemia (the absorption of the matter in the system instead of its discharge). Peter, as far as I saw, had everything requisite in surgical treatment, nursing, etc. He had watches much of the time. He was so good and well-behaved and affectionate, I myself liked him very much. I was in the habit of coming in afternoons and sitting by him, and soothing him, and he liked to have me—liked to put his arm out and lay his hand on my knee—would keep it so a long while. Toward the last he was more restless and flighty at night—often fancied himself with his regiment—by his talk sometimes seem'd as if his feelings were hurt by being blamed by his officers for something he was entirely innocent of—said, “I never in my life was thought capable of such a thing, and never was.” At other times he would fancy himself talking as it seem'd to children or such like, his relatives I suppose, and giving them good advice; would talk to them a long while. All the time he was out of his head not one single bad word or idea escaped him. It was remark'd that many a man's conversation in his senses was not half as good as Peter's delirium. He seem'd quite willing to die—he had become very weak and had suffer'd a good deal, and was perfectly resign'd, poor boy. I do not know his past life, but I feel as if it must have been good. At any rate what I saw of him here, under the most trying circumstances, with a painful wound, and among strangers, I can say that he behaved so brave, so composed, and so sweet

and affectionate, it could not be surpass'd. And now like many other noble and good men, after serving his country as a soldier, he has yielded up his young life at the very outset in her service. Such things are gloomy—yet there is a text, "God doeth all things well"—the meaning of which, after due time, appears to the soul.

I thought perhaps a few words, though from a stranger, about your son, from one who was with him at the last, might be worth while—for I loved the young man, though I but saw him immediately to lose him. I am merely a friend visiting the hospitals occasionally to cheer the wounded and sick.

W. W.

On his way to mail this letter Walt exchanged, as was becoming their habit, cordial bows with a man dressed in black (somewhat rusty and dusty black) who rode an easy-going gray horse and was escorted by cavalrymen in yellow-striped tunics. The man's face, of a dark brown, had lines deeply cut and the eyes, though the expression was latent only, seemed to Walt always to hold a tragical sadness. In subtlety, in indirectness, in powerful reticence and reticent power, the face of Abraham Lincoln surpassed any countenance Walt had ever seen—and I have studied faces if I have studied anything, he reflected. None of the portraits of him has caught the underlying character of these lineaments. . . . Can I read them? I would give all I have to read them . . . and some day, God willing, I shall. . . .

The splendor of that May of '63, bringing him to four-and-forty amid a spread of human havoc that began to seem

perpetual, had pressed so hard upon Walt as to cause him, for the first time in years, definite physical distress of a type more than transitory. His friends—O'Connor, Burroughs, Hay: the two Johns and the one William—were led to utter their several remonstrances. It was this incessant ministry to the wounded and dying, of course; and if Walt were not more reasonable he would suffer an ultimate breakdown.

"Especially," O'Connor harangued him, "you mustn't help in dressing these bad, these gangrened hurts! Will you please bear in mind, Walt, you are doing what the physicians and nurses cannot do? and the only result of doing their work will be a disability preventing you from doing your own?"

"'All things had to be done by Cæsar,'" murmured Hay. "Who do you think you are, Walt, anyway? Oh, I know!" He quoted Walt's own line: "*I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs.*"

Said Burroughs: "To think, Walt, that you wrote that over eight years ago!"

"Yes," added O'Connor, "and he also wrote, over eight years ago, these lines immediately preceding:

*"To any one dying—thither I speed, and twist the knob of the door;
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed;
Let the physician and the priest go home.*

I seize the descending man, and raise him with resistless will.

*O despairer, here is my neck;
By God! you shall not go down! Hang your whole weight
upon me.*

*I dilate you with tremendous breath—I buoy you up;
Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd force,
Lovers of me, bafflers of graves."*

Into the recitation O'Connor put all the surprising natural mimetic gift of his voice and the resistless ardor of his temperament. At the close, he broke down; tears streamed from his fine eyes and he said:

"Little Philip . . . my little son . . ."

15

Fifth Month had passed; Walt was now forty-four. Sixth Month was closing and the last of spring's lilacs had perished, the roses, white and dark-stained red were blossoming, when the poet and the President, through the ingenuity of young Hay, had their first meeting. Their first meeting; let it be said, rather, the first handclasp and exchange of words face to face.

The young secretary noiselessly closed the double doors behind them at the White House, taking himself from the room and barring their solitude from intrusion. Mr. Lincoln, who had been sitting at a table with a finger pressing upon a map, unjointed himself with alertness and advanced toward the broader-shouldered, clear-faced, equally-bearded man whom Hay had just ushered in. The President extended his hand; Walt took it, and they gripped each other heartily. Mr. Lincoln said:

"First time I had a good look at you, Mr. Whitman, I said to the person I was talking with: 'Well, he looks like a *man*.'"

This in a voice of quiet heartiness with a special timbre.

Walt thought: His raciness, tang, is in the voice, after all, like the juice of a good apple; 't isn't in any accent or peculiar words.

"My first sight of you, Mr. President, was when you came to New York in February, '61; must have been about the 18th or 19th. You got out of a barouche, paused on the sidewalk and looked upward at the façade of the Astor House, unkinked your arms and legs with a relieving stretch and then looked out, slowly and good-humoredly over that vast, silent crowd of people. I'll never forget that. I remember, as a small child, seeing Lafayette in that neighborhood in 1825. I had also seen New York welcome Andrew Jackson, Clay, Webster, Kossuth of Hungary, the Prince of Wales—a dozen or more celebres—and each of them with a noise like Niagara. But this! You and those thousands, eyeing each other with an unconcealed curiosity—in silence, in a blend of excitement and doubt. I wondered how you must feel; you seemed at ease; yet I am sure, for a few seconds, the thousands held their breath. It lasted only a minute and then the comedy, almost farce of it, mixed with an indescribable feeling of drama, of verging tragedy, passed. You walked with moderate pace up the steps, passed under the portico, entered the hotel."

"Yes," responded Abraham Lincoln, "they suspended judgment on me, as Tim Modders did on his newly-acquired mule. You have more spread than I, Mr. Whitman; we'll see who's tallest." They measured, then, standing back to back, a full-length mirror against the wall giving the verdict to the tail of Mr. Lincoln's eye.

"I overtop you by close on three inches. Now, that's

very satisfactory. Hay tells me you have some Holland blood, which runs to breadth. I think I ought to tell you that you are no stranger to me. When your book first came out, when *Leaves of Grass* appeared in '55, my law partner in Springfield, Herndon, got hold of a copy and left it lying on the office table. Rankin and the other boys in the office had been reading it some and one day I heard them discussing the poems. I guess likely they thought I didn't hear them, or wasn't paying attention. Well, their talk would have amused you. They did or they did not allow your stuff to be poetry, to begin with, and they didn't allow each other's views at all, to end with. Some criticized particular lines; from that they fell to finding fault with each other's literary taste in general and totally rejecting each other's moral character. To hear them, after about half an hour, you'd have been forced to the conclusion the world must stop until their differences were somehow composed. . . . But it was they who stopped, finally, and not this planet in its revolutions. One or two went out on errands and the others fell to work. I thought this a good opportunity to look into the source of so much wrangling; we hadn't had so much disagreement in that office in my memory; I was anxious to judge for myself whether you were as profound as Shakespeare or as outspoken as the Bible or as funny as Artemus Ward."

"Were you terribly disappointed, Mr. President?"

"No, I wasn't. You were nearer Shakespeare, to my mind, than Mr. Emerson was arriving and your outspokenness didn't bother me very much more than parts of the *Song of Solomon*. I missed a kinship to Artemus Ward but

didn't feel uncomfortable over it; if all men are brothers, what's the use lamenting the absence of the family harelip in second cousins? After I'd browsed in your book some time I turned back to the beginning and commenced reading aloud; I believe I can even now recall the opening lines:

*I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

Yes, those were the words; but they needed all that followed to make them plain. The boys seemed surprised when I commenced reading aloud; I suppose because they were used to hearing me read out only newspaper extracts, generally political in character. Herndon and Bateman, who had taken part in the argumentation over the book but had then gone back to their offices, came in and listened. Several spoke up at the close to the effect that, as I read it, 'the book seemed to them much more like poetry—different from the usual thing but decidedly alive and here and there, at least, quite beautiful.'

"Tell me frankly, Mr. President, your own feeling as expressed at the time—if you will."

"Almost unqualifiedly favorable; I thought a few of the words and phrases doubtful, not because there should be any objection to calling a spade a spade but because it is sometimes more forceful, as emphasizing its use, to call the spade an implement. It may happily chance, now and again, that the truest and therefore the most poetic expression of a thought will also be an expression less likely to offend the literal-minded. But I believe you made some changes afterward?"

“A few, but only for the reason you speak of. Sweeping changes seemed to me to involve a denial, a recantation, fundamentally dishonest. When Emerson thrashed it out with me, though I couldn't answer him, I felt I could retract nothing; for all that, I continue to make alterations and shall keep on making them, doubtless, as long as I live—additions, too, as well as excisions.”

“You change your mind; well, so do I, and I don't think much of the man who isn't wiser to-day than he was yesterday. To finish the tale of our first encounter: After I had stopped reading we had another discussion in the Springfield office—a little more temperate, I think. The others asked me what I found in you, and my answer was that, first off, what I didn't find in you mattered. I didn't find any cheap, base thoughts; I didn't find somebody else's thoughts in hand-me-down phrases. When I considered what I did find, I had to report: Manliness, frankness, tolerance and the strong, natural impulses of youth and manhood; all these I liked. I liked not less the mingling of abstract ideas and natural objects, for a man ought to be able to make his mind and his senses work together with the aptitude of his two hands. You took your comparisons from the fields and sky and the faces of men and women and from our common body; this pleased me and wonderfully freshened me by making those usual sights mean more than they had before. I thought also you found, oftener than not, words that were sponge-like, absorbing the rich sap of your feeling and allowing it readily to be squeezed out again.”

“My book has had a reader!”

“Herndon’s copy narrowly escaped perishing half-read. I took it home that night. . . . When, in the morning, I laid it down on Bateman’s table, it was impossible to forbear telling him I had barely saved it from being purified in fire by the women.”

The President smiled, in the way he had, sometimes, of smiling without seeming to; a whimsical gleam was advanced for a moment to the front of the eyes under the deep proscenium arch of the forehead; for a trifle high comedy held the stage customarily given to a half-disclosed drama of reflective sadness. The ill-nourished black hair which, to please a capricious little girl, he had allowed to mutilate a face of tenderly-graven dignity and beauty, left to inference whether in such flashes the plowed cheeks turned new furrows or remained soberly inflexible. But Walt’s own eyes regarded without disfavor the poorly-fitting drapery of whisker. . . . He said:

“I have lately had one or two letters from women who grasped essential meanings; realized no offense was meant, and took none.”

“Such women there will increasingly be. But I meant, Mr. Whitman, to wind up only by adding that at my request Herndon left your book on the office table and thereafter, time and again, as I was entering or about to leave, my eye falling on the volume I would pick it up and find myself soon caught in the firm clutch of your poems . . . they and my mood would interweave until I would have been hard put to it to tell what was yours, what mine, believingly, on the subjects we dwelt on. It always ended with my reading some passage aloud; and though I seldom found

any of the others to agree with me, yet they liked you more and more, I think. Now I have talked enough about myself."

"Yourself!"

"Well, ourself, then! I want particularly to hear about you and your visits to the wounded men."

A gentle rap was followed immediately by the opening of the folding doors. John Hay stood framed between them. His blond boy's face exhibited two spots of high color. He spoke to the President.

"Sir, Meade is fighting Lee at Gettysburg."

Mr. Lincoln changed instantaneously. He seized and pressed Walt's hand.

"You must come again in a day or two and tell me. God speed you!"

He returned to the table and the map. The wound-dresser, passing out, heard that high-pitched yet pleasant voice calling:

"Hay! Will you send to Stanton for a detail of the ground? The scale here isn't large enough."

Walt went forth from his talk with Abraham Lincoln in a mood more exalted than he had felt for months or years; there has been nothing like it, he told himself, in my life since '55 and my book's borning. . . . If I felt I were not to see him again, a depression such as I have rarely known would fall upon me; he is so patently the man of my ideal and more even than I have been able to idealize; he is a transcension of America, shapen for these fluxing hours

and days, and we may go for another century patiently molding ourselves to his grand, large-contoured character and need no more spacious model. . . . Do I declare this because he was among those first few to read my book and embrace it? If that were my vanity, might I be damned to the littleness of my puffed-up contentment. No, I declare this because the man face to face and eye to eye, in closest scrutiny and uninterrupted audience, signally confirms the impression derived from his public words and acts.

What that impression is, in anything like totality, I shall not find it easy to say to myself; yet I must manage that not only but must somehow convey the correct impression to others. Nor will it be excused me, nor very greatly extenuated, if I fail. If I am a poet, then I am a prophet; if I or any other would prophesy, he must— What must he?

Milton stated as his object: To justify the ways of God to man; but that was not the rock on which Christ built His church that the gates of hell should not prevail against. Rather is it a quicksand in which through repeated centuries the theologians have mired themselves; on the one hand asserting that God's way remained a mystery forever and on the other constantly attempting to explain God's purposes. The object which Milton truly set for himself he actually misconceived. He was, contrariwise, attempting to justify the ways of man (that is, the mind of man) to God, by showing how loftily our mortal mind could conceive of God's purposes and how, without understanding them, our human mind could accept them, to its own magnification.

. . . Collect, deploying thoughts of mine; assemble and order yourselves for the future sure and powerful execution of a formidably difficult design! (My poor brain yet buzzes and sings with the wealth and force of my impression. How recondite, farreaching and delicate is that fresh impression; still not the faintest traced line of it can be spared.)

This, then, has been the rôle of the greatest poets and prophets (the two are interchangeable; they foretell the future simply to the extent they reveal the present or rekindle the past): To show the greatness, magnitude of Man in his relation to the Universe; and this magnitude can be shown in two ways only, first, by the sweep of his understanding, and second, by the largeness of his acceptance of that which he cannot understand. The poet-prophet, or prophet-poet, perpetually, joyously confronts two tasks. The first is the task of chanting Man's loftiest conceptions and the second is the task of chanting Man's sublime acceptance. . . . Out of the fusion of these purposes arises his last achievement, the one he can approach but indirectly; namely, showing that in the very act of acceptance, in the very moment of confessing non-understanding, Man most truly understands. . . .

Is this mystical? but the universe is mystical and I, Walt Whitman, am supremely a mystic; not less so than the great dead. For greatness or littleness are not in the realm of the mystic who knows only the union of the pure heart and the fierce intention; to conscience he allows a directive sway, a firm hand on the reins of his yoke-fellows, but he knows full well the wreck piled up if conscience drives with whip in hand. What heart and soul do not wilfully accomplish,

conscience shall not whip out of them; lest her lash (the Three Furies, twined) take right of way from the hearts and souls of others and drive, in a puritan, a fanatical gallopade, straight to destruction. . . .

Where Milton and Dante architected single poems, I am building a book with the same poetic-prophetic intention. My book is not complete (I may never be able to complete it); but this I know, it must pay tribute to Abraham Lincoln. By showing the loftiness of his conceptions, I will show the altitude attainable by men in their conceptions; by showing the immensity of his acceptance, I will show how grandly men may accept. . . . Perhaps, achieving these or partially achieving these, I may show that in acceptance he somehow understood . . . and is to be understood.

. . . The burst of music came from the mounted band heading a large cavalry detachment; bugles, drums and cymbals played mad martial airs. Sabers clanked, the hoofs of horses made an electric tramping on the pavement; young, healthy, strong men sat erectly with bright, impassive faces (their bodies rigid yet resilient). Walt saw them and a salvo within him saluted the symbol they carried.

*Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress,
(bend your heads all.)
Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon'd
mistress,
Pioneers! O pioneers!*

He hastened on to his lodgings, went without delay to his room and seated himself at the table, snatching sheets of paper.

*Come, my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready; . . .
Swift! to the head of the army!—swift! spring to your places,
Pioneers! O pioneers!*

The alpha and the omega of a poem were here, with one of the intervening stanzas. . . . He worked steadily for three hours, at the end of which he was not finished but had, at least, perfected *this*:

*Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied, over there beyond
the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the lesson,
Pioneers! O pioneers!*

For so I read the faces of those young men, he thought. . . . The feet of the young men. . . . I must refresh myself and go forth among the young men, Father Abraham's tan-faced children. . . .

17

Walt went through the hospital slowly that evening, sitting by a half-dozen bedsides and talking mostly of the memorable visit he had paid that afternoon; a little of the effect upon him of those cavalymen riding into Washington out of the sunset, children of the West which was America. . . . The men listened gravely to his description of Mr. Lincoln's face and voice and to each Walt told the President's request to know about them—about *them* as well as about their comrades unwounded and fighting. Of the main part of the President's discourse Walt said nothing. I am not a poet to these boys, he had long since instructed himself, but simply a friend and a helper. . . .

In one ward a Catholic priest was administering the rite of extreme unction to a dying soldier; it was not the first time Walt had witnessed this scene, yet he found its impressiveness strengthened with each observation. . . . Have I made light of ceremonials, any place? he interrogated himself; and though unable to recollect distinctly such a passage he took a resolution to make amends if he should find one. For what is a rite of any sort, Walt, but the demand for utterance? the "outer and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace?" and who shall say that the virtue which has once bodied itself forth in the sign may not flow back from the sign into an aching and empty spirit?

A sound from the bedside by which he was sitting put a stop to the brief meditation.

"What is it, Oscar?"

"Please, Walt, read me a bit from the Bible, a chapter from the New Testament."

Walt felt in his pocket.

"What passage would you like, Oscar?"

"You . . . choose."

The Book happening to open at the close of one of the Gospels, Walt read the chapters describing the last hours of Christ and the scenes attending the Crucifixion. Poor, wasted Oscar Wilber then asked for the succeeding chapter, how Christ rose again. Walt read with careful slowness so that the much-enfeebled boy, listening with strained attention, might miss nothing.

"Are you pleased with that, Oscar?"

"Oh, yes!" He was in tears, but repeated, very ear-

nestly: "Yes! Would you tell me: Do you enjoy religion?"

"Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean . . . and yet, maybe 'tis the same thing."

"It is my chief reliance."

He fell silent; dabbed at his eyes a little, and finally said:

"I somehow have no fear of death."

"Why, Oscar, don't you think you will get well?" Wait put a special encouragement into his tone.

"I may, but it is not probable."

Walt was silent, feeling the boy to be even then the same as dying. A bad, bad wound; fetid; and settled diarrhea. . . . Yet he behaved very manly and affectionate.

Across the aisle the priest of God dipped his thumb in the oil.

Suddenly bending over the dying boy, Walt kissed him. The thinned arms reached up and clasped him about the neck, drew him down, and the boy's lips returned the kiss fourfold. . . .

18

"That is how they meet death, Mr. Lincoln," said Walt, as he finished a simple narrative of things seen with the behavior of Oscar Wilber. "If death ended all, they could not meet death better."

The President's distress had been so sharp and so evident that Walt had several times desisted, saying:

"You have enough to sustain, Mr. Lincoln, without hearing these incidents."

"I am eager to hear them," was the unhesitating answer. "I have found, Mr. Whitman, that knowledge painfully come by teaches me personally better than any other. I think it is well to know how to die since few of us live lives that cannot be redeemed by the manner of their closing." Again, when Walt would have stopped the recital, he was told: "Please keep on." A third time the President, controlling a sob, motioned him to continue. At Walt's words: "If death ended all, they could not meet death better," Mr. Lincoln took his hand, held it a moment and then let it go with the words: "Thank you. . . ."

The pause was broken by the repetition, in Mr. Lincoln's tenderest voice, of the words: "If death ended all . . ." And after a shorter interval, the President re-commenced with:

"I coax Hay to read to me sometimes. Usually a passage of Shakespeare, or a whole act or particular scenes. Since your call the other day and our talk, I have had him read me once or twice from your book. These concluding lines of the '55 edition stay with me:

*Great is life . . . and real and mystical . . . wherever and who-
ever,
Great is death . . . Sure as life holds all parts together, death
holds all parts together;
Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light, death
is great as life.*

I believe that, Mr. Whitman; yes, I believe! . . . Tell me, do you put faith in dreams?"

“One dream I had, years ago, has lately explained itself to me in terms of America at war.”

“One dream I have had, too, but recurrently and always presaging good news. It has come to mean to me the announcement of victory. I had it before Antietam and before Murfreesborough and before Gettysburg, just terminated. Last night I was visited with it again; I greatly hope this was no idle mirage of the nights before; to look for another success so soon seems more than we can dare. But perhaps you will be curious to know the dream itself. In it I find myself sailing on a ship of strange build. The ship herself I cannot describe for I am never able to make out her lines distinctly; but I suppose an interior person such as I am would be incapable of telling wherein the difference from other vessels lay. But no matter; she is always the same, in spite of her pronounced oddity. And she bears me with great speed toward a dark and undefined shore. Now that is the whole of it; what would you make of the meaning?”

“Might not the ship be a symbol of the Union?”

“No, I shouldn't venture to take so great a conceit to explain the business, Mr. Whitman. . . . After all, this is a trifle. Only the coincidence of the dream with our successes interests me; makes me hope, since last night's fresh experience of it— Gettysburg has been terribly costly; we have lost somewhere around 23,000 men out of 93,000; Lee and Longstreet have had equal losses from a total force of just under 80,000; so the sacrifice of Antietam has been doubled. I pray to more purpose! If Meade will but follow up Lee with boldness, as McClellan ought to have done and did not. . . .”

“The victory, I take it, is incomplete in your judgment?”

“My judgment borrows heavily from my hopes, Mr. Whitman; too heavily, it may be. Gettysburg is our greatest victory so far; but only in the negative sense of the danger from which it has freed us. Lee’s planned invasion of the North was this time not aimed at Washington but at industrial Pennsylvania, at our forge, our smithy, without which we could not equip or weapon our armies. The threat has been annulled and the menace removed. What I could wish with all my heart to see is the extermination of any such menace in the future. We ought not to be content to repel Lee; we ought to put him out of the fighting; to disable him effectually should be our sole cherished objective. I have made it clear to General Meade, I think, how anxious a faith I place in him to do that; he must not let Lee recross the Potomac; he must not let Lee get clean away!”

Walt had picked up a book lying on the table. The President, observing this, exchanged the insistent cares of the hour for a refreshment of recollection. “That is a volume sent me a while ago by James H. Hackett. I am sorry to add that I have not got around to acknowledging its receipt. When I do so I must explain that for one of my age I have seen very little of the drama. Mr. Hackett, last winter, was my first sight of *Falstaff*; I would give something to see him again in the rôle. To be honest, there are plays of Shakespeare’s I have never read; certain ones I suppose I have read as frequently as any unprofessional reader, among them *Lear*, *Richard III.*, *Henry VIII.*, *Hamlet*, and especially *Macbeth*. I think *Macbeth* wonderful; nothing to me quite equals it. No doubt it is a defect in my taste,

but in *Hamlet* I think the King's soliloquy commencing 'O, my offense is rank,' surpasses the favorite 'To be or not to be.'" He quoted, with slow, appreciative relish. "'*There* is no shuffling, *there* the action lies in his true nature.'" "

Any allusion to the drama was enough to kindle Walt; he spoke with vivid memory and enthusiasm of plays and players, chiefly those who, fifteen to twenty-five years earlier, had made luminous New York's Bowery. With an effort Walt finally gave over a favorite topic, and said:

"Mr. President, I had it in mind to ask you to-day, in case you have given it any thought or would be willing to repose in me any confidence on the subject, what your present feeling is regarding the policy to be pursued toward the South in the event of a final victory for the Union? Briefly, how would you treat them?" "

"Treat them?" was the response in a voice of warmth and extraordinary sweetness. "Mr. Whitman, I would treat them as though they had never drawn away."

The tears welled up and Walt could not see very plainly; there was a blurring of everything and he found he had not the use of his voice at all. In a manner he could not have explained (yet it seemed almost visual) the uncouth and gangling figure facing him took on a character of transfiguration. The sound and gentle sweetness of Abraham Lincoln was fully revealed; could positively be felt like the emanation of an abiding force or vital principle—which I doubt not it is! Walt's heart cried out within him, fervently and thankfully. . . . He finally managed:

"Would you permit me, Mr. President, to express that

intention—oh, generous! noble! worthy of you!—to some of the rebel wounded? as a small means of reassurance, consolation? with the plainly-added warning that the Executive may influence but cannot, of course, control the Congress.”

Mr. Lincoln’s forehead showed deep vertical lines.

“As person to person, for the comfort of individuals, I think you may say it. I should be loath to have it misconstrued. An absolute and unqualified surrender is the indispensable preliminary to treating with them at all. . . . But were the surrender before me, that would be my policy. A day will come when, remembering that for which we have fought, the sacredness of the Union, we shall realize that no Union can exist without harmony, and that to secure and perpetuate harmony we must extinguish resentments as you would stamp out the smolder of a creeping fire. May God grant me to see that day!”

“Mr. President, you have great faith—the sublimest faith of any of us! Beside yours, mine is a very small thing. And yet I have had, have still, my rapt visions of the future of America. Can you throw into words your ideas as to the form that future will likeliest take?”

“It used to be a subject of speculation with me, Mr. Whitman, but, alas! under the heavy weight of responsibilities I think no more about the future except in terms of the tortured present. . . . We have freed the slaves. We did it as a military necessity and thus has been accomplished what was right to be done, as I believe, but not in that way. Under Providence, I acted as light was given me; but a gradual emancipation in a peaceful society seemed to me, and yet seems, more merciful to the negro himself. With a sentiment

to enfranchise the black immediately I am not in sympathy; far less do I agree with those who find an innate equality of black man and white and would not merely proclaim but enforce it. It was once my destiny to defend against a political opponent, Senator Douglas, the declaration that 'all men are created equal'; but I was at some pains to specify then and I should specify, under like circumstances to-day, that in my opinion, while the authors of that statement intended to include *all* men, they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. No one pretends all white men are equals in color, size, intellect or moral or social capacities. But the assertion that 'all men are created equal' was followed by other words in which, with tolerable distinctness, it was stated in what respects all men were deemed equals, namely, equally endowed with 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This our fathers said; this they meant. Their purpose was to safeguard the future; for the assertion was of no practical use or bearing in a struggle for separation from Great Britain. I have only one word of advice for those who are concerned lest the negro fail immediately to secure political and social equality with the white man: Let them watch closely for the maintenance, among both whites and blacks, of the exact equality our fathers specified. Let them do everything in their power to see that to every man and woman, now and henceforth, white or black, security of life, security of personal liberty, and a secure opportunity toward happy pursuits is assured! "

" Ah! Years back, a friend pointed out to me that with its defeat in the political form, tyranny would reassert itself

in newer, more insidious forms. He foresaw the possibility of a vast system of industrial slavery from which emancipation would be long and difficult, and not possible by any fiat like yours unshackling the negro! ”

“ Your friend saw clearly, Mr. Whitman. There is a power of money in our country which will bear all the vigilance, and I think engage all the strength in grapple, of our equalitarians.”

“ I am struck by one thing. You do not see the real American future in terms of territorial expansion, teeming wealth, material riches and prosperity.”

“ God forbid! ”

“ I can never express my sense of how right you are. . . .”

“ The future of America is no more predominantly a question of lands, goods and chattels than the future of an individual. If we permit the acquisition of territory or wealth to enslave us, what can we hope for beyond the fate of Carthage or Rome? The health and hardihood of the race, the safening of life, the continual re-assertion of liberty, the study of what constitutes our happiness—only these make a beckoning future on this continent or any other continent. And now I must bid you farewell with an injunction not to be too long in coming again.”

“ I shall think of your dream and hope it may not fail you.”

Walt was not down the steps of the White House when the telegraph wires brought the news that Vicksburg had fallen on Saturday. He did not hear of it, however, until that night when newspaper extras were shouted through the streets. Hearing it, on his way to the hospitals, he felt

momentarily dazed by the immensity of this success—no battle, this, but a siege, a victorious campaign. . . . In the enfolding darkness under the trees that July evening there rose up before him the mirage of a strangely-molded vessel on the deck of which stood, with sparse, blown hair, a solitary voyager. The ship rushed through a cold and sprayless ocean, through multitudinous seas incarnadine whose green became one red. O, fearful Dream! what do you portend? and what is the distant shore with people all a-crowding? . . . *Here Captain! dear father! . . . It is some dream that on the deck you've fallen cold and dead. . . .*

19

Something familiar in the boy's face attracted Walt; something arresting; something which slowed the beat of the heart and then allowed a double-beat (*t-h-r-o-b . . . th-throb!*) in tardy compensation.

"Hopeless," whispered the nurse. "Not expected to recover consciousness. Transferred case from the field hospital near Culpepper. We have his father's name and address, if you want to write."

"I'll copy it off before I go."

He stood with fascinated gaze looking down at the youth's face . . . features, coloring, so disturbingly, so almost shockingly familiar. The eyes were closed. At length, with gently retracting lids (no other slightest stir or movement) they were opened and the limpid glance from their gold-flecked irises struck full upon Walt's.

Recognition. . . .

He saw the blue irises of her eyes marked just so with

brown and golden; saw the slight roundedness of her shoulders that yearned for pillowing on a firm young breast; saw the smooth shapeliness of her forearm made for clasping her lover's bared throat. . . . Saw her coiled, saddle-colored hair amid the blossoming lilacs. *Saw . . .*

"Dear boy, has your mother—?"

The whole ward was becoming dim; dissolving.

"I never knew her." Not much more than a whisper. "I was her firstborn; she died giving birth to me."

(God, if You would but give me to change places with him! God, cannot it somehow be compassed? God, You had a Son; have mercy upon me who have none . . . whose son this lad might have been. O, dear God, at the very smallest spare this child of hers!)

A faint quiver shook the boy's body; the blue eyes starred with gold and brown remained open, but the light left them.

"He was going to copy the father's name and address. I've scribbled it all on this slip of paper. Tuck it in his pocket. See? 'David Sayre, Jr., pvt., 51st N. Y. Volunteers: notify father, D. Sayre, Smithtown, L. I., N. Y.' . . . I never saw old Walt keel over like that before. This work is beginning to tell on him. Better put some stuff on that scratched place on his hand; the case was badly gangrened. Did you call the ambulance? . . . All right, then."

"I observed at once, you were not looking well. Would it be of any avail if you were to pour it all out to me in

confidence? Now it may just so be, I can give the relief that comes from having a sympathetic listener. If it will help, tell me, Mr. Whitman—Walt!”

Mr. Lincoln's caller reached a hand for the back of a chair.

“You had no business standing! Here. . . .”

The gaunt President, with a kind of supple, wiry strength in his awkward figure clothed in a rusty, funereal black, hooked one hand under Walt's arm and lowered him to his seat. Then, drawing up another chair, seating himself with back bent forward and large hands on his unaccommodating knees, Mr. Lincoln repeated, in a kind tone:

“Tell me. . . . In your own time. . . .”

For a few moments the two men sat looking directly at each other, tears issuing from Walt's eyes. The President's own were misted.

“Mr. Lincoln . . . once there was a woman who loved me and detained me for love of me. It was my lot to find dying here in Washington her young brother—all she had in the world. It was my lot to write his letter to her, for him. . . . There was also and earlier, when I was a youth of twenty-one, a woman I loved. Her I could not have—and yet I think I had something of her love. This I know, Esther Terry had some essential portion of me; you will not ask me to explain what cannot be explained beyond saying: I feel our oneness forever. That sacred feeling I have kept . . . and keep. The other night, after a separation of many years, I looked again into her eyes; and they were the eyes of her son, her firstborn for whom she gave her

life; and he was dying. . . . Myself saw him go to join her. . . . O, Esther! Wife, mother, gliding near with soft feet . . .”

The paroxysm passed; Abraham Lincoln waited until it had passed to say:

“There was once something in my own life, known to not many and to no one (I include myself in the ‘no one’) with perfect insight except, perhaps, to *her* . . . and she, too, is dead. At somewhat past your age in that first encounter, my friend, I had to endure what you endured and tell me of; but it all swooped down on me at once—like a great hawk, beak and talons both—for in the space of three days I lost the promise of her as my wife and she died.”

In Walt an easily-aroused sympathy, much magnified by his great admiration of, love for Lincoln, began the hard task of stemming his flooding grief. He was unable to say anything but the President perceived from his eyes his complete attention.

“Her name was Ann Rutledge. Her father kept a store and tavern and boarded me. I was twenty-four or -five. She was such a mite of a little woman, alongside my inches; I guess there was more than a foot’s difference. I believe she was rated a beauty by many; but her kindness was what first touched me; you would scarcely understand, Friend Whitman, what a lonely and miserable existence I led in those days. The young man whose homeliness marks him out is likely to have a nervous dread of women, especially young women. I had. When ladies were staying at my boarding house, I victualed myself elsewhere. You see, I was without nice manners, wore distressed clothes, and

wasn't used to any comforts, let alone elegancies. There was something wonderfully dainty about Mr. Rutledge's daughter, with her coppery-gold hair. She had blue eyes, too, and the whitest, prettiest skin. Well, I remember chiefly how kind and gentle she was to me, first off."

The lover of Ann Rutledge shone in the eyes of Abraham Lincoln, curiously dark for eyes of gray. Walt respected the pause of silence.

"I couldn't tell you all of it, nor anybody. But she had been promised to a young man who had unexpectedly gone back to his home in the East after explaining to her that he'd been passing under another name than was rightfully his. What his account of it was she did not tell me and I never asked; but she was convinced by it as told. She expected him back.

"When he did not write for some time she thought nothing of it, but when at length he did write his letters gave her a good deal of puzzlement and anxiety. Meanwhile her friends, to whom she had been obliged to give the gist of his explanation, were skeptical and kept talking to her. . . . She stoutly defended him, of course, but his absence dragged itself out; the time came when she had nothing to adduce against her friends' arguments and conclusions but her own implicit faith in his rightness. That was fatally weakened by his behavior in continuing to stay East and affording no satisfactory or comprehensible reasons—in fact, failing after a while to write her at all or to answer her pitiful letters. So she gave him up; and shortly afterward she met me.

"We were not long promised to marry when she fell seriously ill and then demanded to see me privately. You must

not suppose she had failed in frankness toward me; I knew all that was essential for me to know about the other man; I was now to know more; I was now to understand that he had killed her. Mr. Whitman, she died of grief, as much as, or more than, anything else! ”

Walt's heart went out to the man in whom this memory, after thirty years and in the midst of crushing outside stresses, kindled such fresh suffering.

“ She had at last, after long silence, after promising herself to me, received from him a letter completely explaining all circumstances. Briefly they were that he had at home stood accused of a crime of which he was innocent. A mistaken impulse had led him to assume another name and go West. A warning reached him that he had been traced under his disguise; but it also appeared that developments East were tending to clear him of the wrongful charge. He returned, resumed his proper name, and waited hopefully for the proof he was innocent; but something miscarried, it was not forthcoming, and he was tried, convicted and sent to prison. When imprisoned, wishing to conceal this last shock from one who still perfectly believed in him, he ceased to write. Then the once-expected tardily came to pass; new evidence showed his innocence beyond any question, and he was freed from prison after serving just under a year of a five years' sentence. You know how scanty was the flow of news in the '30s and how unlikely it was that in Springfield, Illinois, anything should be heard of a minor trial and its result in Vermont. On being released, the extraordinary circumstances caused something to be printed about the affair, I understand, but his joyful letter explain-

ing to her and renewing his claim upon her was the first intelligence she, or any of us, received.

“That was the acute cause of her illness, and that was what she called me in, alone, to listen to. I cannot describe what I went through; you will have some idea from your own experience. I finally offered to release her but this seemed only to make her suffering more extreme. It was now plain to her that though she had once loved him, she now loved me; we equally loved her and equally had an honorable claim. The situation was beyond her; she was near crazed with her grief and remorse. . . . I cannot tell you about it. . . . Nothing was solved. . . . In two days, the fever taking her, she died. . . .”

Lincoln's back went against the back of his chair, his head drooped forward, his large knotted hands gripped and the fingers kneaded the upthrust and awkward knees; after a moment the hands fell to his side but the fingers continued to close and unclosed in an irregular, tautened fashion as though the joints were stiffly rheumatic; observing, one half-expected him to cry out with the sharp pain of their flexing. But he cried out not at all; the only sound was the sharp intake of breath mastering a convulsive sob. . . . When Walt could speak, he said:

“I had heard you early had a great grief in your life. How great and how pitiful . . . out of my fresh experience and my old, God gives me somewhat to understand.”

“To a few good friends, I owe my life to-day,” Lincoln answered. “To Bowline Greene, who bore me away to a secluded house, his own home, and watched me night and day. The thought that the snows and rains fell upon her

grave filled me with indescribable anguish. As long as two years afterward, serving in the Illinois Legislature, though I doubtless seemed to others to enjoy life rapturously, yet when alone I was so overcome by mental depression, I never dared carry even a pocket-knife. . . . The time came when I could look upon her grave without breaking down utterly and confess aloud: 'My heart lies buried there.' But when Greene died and I was expected to speak over his fresh-made grave, I could not do it. Then, long, long afterward, as we measure time when young, the tears ran down my face as I looked at the loam and gravel resting on him who had saved me from myself. . . . I made repeated efforts to say something, but at the last could only stride away, sobbing. . . . The effect of that grief, of a melancholy that my friends admitted bordered on insanity, has been permanent upon me. Those who know me well have shown me a forbearance and indulgence I shall never be able to repay. . . ."

"Forgive me for saying: Yet you are happily-married and a father. . . ."

"For which I owe an everlasting debt to Joshua Speed. . . . I am painfully conscious of my own shortcomings and have much to be thankful for in being granted a degree of domestic happiness beyond my deserts—beyond my limited power to have earned without Mrs. Lincoln's true help."

"I would give everything," Walt said brokenly, "to be able to utter an equivalent of that."

"Speed a second time saved me. Greene had saved my life and Speed, by his advice and example, made it possible for me to go some way toward the construction of a reason-

able happiness. In the year following my great loss, in my upset condition, I was involved with a woman slightly older than myself—long since happily married and now living and, I think, feeling friendly toward me. There is no need to speak of her further, as she wisely discovered we were not suited to each other. A year or two passed before I met my wife. We had agreed to marry when I one day wrote a letter to break it off.”

Lincoln hesitated a moment, continuing:

“I don’t know whether you will quite grasp what I mean when I tell you: The prospect of marriage had always filled me with strange perturbation; the idea, the conception of the married state, was a subject of wonder and dread and anxiety to me in a manner I could not then have explained and cannot even now. In contemplating what, it seemed to me, must be a happiness nothing short of heavenly or a horror not to be painted, I had not always a very good control of myself. In such a mood, at last apparently settled and persistent, I composed this letter and showed it to Speed.

“He told me, what I saw was true, that if I had the courage of a man I would not write her on such a subject, but see her and speak. This I did. When she cried it seemed natural to kiss and try to comfort her; but it took Speed to point out to me that in so doing I had as good as retracted my words and renewed my promise to marry.

“But on the first of the year, on New Year’s, 1841, I seemed to go utterly to pieces. For weeks afterward it was uncertain to me whether I should die or grow better; my

foreboding was I should not live; my only certainty was, I could not remain as I was; and must either be better or die.

“The thing which saved me was Speed’s own experience, which began shortly with the prospect of marriage for him. Beginning to suffer the searchings and anxieties I had suffered—that we had somewhat shared in our nervous dread on the matter—he confided in me, as before, and it became my task to reassure him. I had to tell him his painful, recurring apprehension—that he did not love Fanny as he should—was nonsense; and I had further to prove it nonsense by showing him that as an insufficient lover he could never have courted her. When he thought he had reasoned himself into that, I asked him to consider whether, in fact, he had not found himself unable to reason his way out of it. I asked him to judge what earthly consideration he would take to find her despising him . . . and so, by degrees, it was given me to bring him into an honest perception of the actual case. I was helped by Fanny’s illness for a short time—nothing serious. Speed was dreadfully worried; I wrote him his present anxieties ought to banish forever his doubts as to the truth of his affection; I suspect they did. It was my conviction, expressed in a letter written him a few days after he became Fanny’s husband, that all his nervous terror and self-torture would vanish in a few months, leaving him as happy as any man alive.

“I was right. In less than two months he wrote me that he was far happier than ever he had expected to be. As I well knew his expectations, like my own, were probably extravagant, I exclaimed joyfully: ‘Enough, dear Lord!’

For I had long believed it our peculiar misfortune, his and mine, to dream dreams of a felicity exceeding anything that earth could realize. . . . That was in the spring of '42. In the fall I wrote Speed again, somewhat as follows:

“ ‘The severe suffering you endured for the six months till your marriage-day, you never tried to hide from me; I understood it well. You have now been the husband of a dear woman about eight months; I know you to be happier than the day you married her, but I want to ask a close question! Are you now in *feeling* as well as in *judgment* glad you are married as you are? I think you will pardon from me this question which, from any one else alive, you would very properly not tolerate.’

“ Mr. Whitman, I had his answer which naturally I should have no right to repeat even to you; I must make my own confidences but cannot include another's. You will draw the correct conclusion from the fact that a month after thus writing him I was married.”

The look of unhappiness on Walt's face greatly moved the President.

“ You are thinking,” said Lincoln, “ that in some such fashion, with the aid of some such friendly example, you might have been able to construct a happiness similar to mine. . . . Walt, it is an every-day sort of happiness, a ‘working’ happiness as one would say; ‘practicable’ is the phrase I think employed on the stage to describe such sets and scene-shifts as are not merely background but can be used—a door you can walk through, a door that is not merely painted on the backdrop, is a ‘practicable’ door. . . . In a world where a good deal is simply painted on the

backdrop, I found a practicable door. That is my married happiness. . . .”

“Could it have been mine? Oh, could it have been mine!” An unanswerable question; an unfulfillable wish.

Walt’s last words were:

“Never think of me without also thinking of her. Think of me as standing outside the whitewashed palings, close to a lilac-bush tall-growing, held by its mastering odor, while her dear figure moves across the dooryard fronting the farmhouse. Look for a great star that droops in the western sky; listen for the voice of a hermit thrush. . . . In the swamp, in secluded recesses, a shy and hidden bird, in notes bashful and tender, singing by himself a song. . . .”

He went forth to the hospitals, to the spreading floors where lay so many boys, so many motherless, so many gently welcoming a Dark Mother, gliding near with soft feet. . . .

END OF PART THREE

PART FOUR

THE ANSWERER

I

VERY early in the morning of April 15, 1865, word came to the Whitman household (as to the thousands of other Brooklyn households; and shortly to the million of American households) that Abraham Lincoln had surrendered his life in the service of a united America.

Walt was home with his mother. Though the usual hearty breakfast was placed steaming on the table, it went untouched. The mother and sons swallowed a little coffee, but none was able to drain the cup.

The day was a silent succession of newspaper extras, rapidly and feverishly scanned; then read and re-read and read minutely, iteratively, mechanically one time more.

The mother alone exerted herself. In a dazed way she went about the preparation of dinner and supper; at intervals, stopping and throwing her apron over her head, she would break into weak sobbing. When the food was ready she put it on the table. But she did not seat herself at the table; her sons did not come to the table; she had not the heart to summon them, and after an uncertain wait, trance-like, she bore the food away again.

Walt scarcely stirred the day long. At night, when the others had moved drearily to bed, he sat looking straight

before him. My book, *Drum Taps*, hymns of the war, is nearly ready to put on the press. My book is now worthless. . . . Stop the press; tear up the book. . . . Him I love lies murdered. *The sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands* . . .

The Brooklyn house had a little yard; on this unusually warm Fourth Month evening, Walt sat beside an open window through which came with sudden stealth, like a wistful caress, the sharp scent of flowering lilacs. . . . There was a bush of purple lilac in the yard which had blossomed for the first time that day, but he had not noticed the cluster; he had noticed nothing. . . .

Lilac, on the breath of the night (a dark night with but a single star; a tearful night that lowered over a desolated country). Lilac . . . the ever-living memory of the dead. . . .

The faint, sweet and terrible intoxication of the odor crept into his blood. No man but Lincoln had ever known . . .

None but Lincoln ever should know. A secret shared with the dead was beautiful . . . a secret of love, a secret of death, a secret of immortality, which is the perpetual triumph of love over death . . .

He lifted up a transfigured countenance and spoke to the dead.

"*You* shall not go unsung to your burial," he whispered.

2

In the still house, the lamp freshly lighted, he set to work.

I one time thought to compose on the theme of you an epic of all that should make America imperishable; I one

time thought you should become for me the incomparable subject of work to set beside Milton's or Dante's. Once I dreamed of proclaiming your greatness of stature and your nobility in action and your grandeur as a human soul.

But I heard, as few or none can have heard, from your own lips the story of your life, its early tragedy and your fought-for happiness. . . . I heard how tenderly you had loved and how irretrievably you had lost; I know, for you told me, the pitifully-measured whole of the human love that should have been overflowingly yours. To me you are no longer the subject of heroic poetry but the theme of a lament such as the still-living lines to Lycidas. . . . A burial hymn, a threnody, I compose for you. A few simple pictures, the simple expression of an unrestrained emotion, I offer you. . . .

I

*When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd . . .
(Dear, dead friend; you will not have forgotten.)
When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd—and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.*

This spring night is like that other how many years ago. The same star . . . alone. I think that star is become you.

*O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.*

I have sounded the first strain. Now I write down, without plan as to what it shall contain:

II

Lilac! Oh, this grief is too much for me. It must burst out, utter itself, in a flood of pitiful-pale words. I must give way to it, else I can go no farther. . . .

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my soul!

. . . I must, MUST control this. . . . There is one way, and one only, I can do that. Without further prelude, let me conjure up the lasting memory of my own life. Let me make a simple picture—all, all but *her* shall be included. Let me pay you this as my dearest tribute after all. Let me share with you in death the secret, wounding yet delicious, I shared with you, and with you only, in life. . . . Others may read, will read, and innocently suspect nothing; will not guess the presence of *her* of whom you will know. . . .

Isolated, by itself, without further prelude:

III

In the door-yard fronting an old farm-house, near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac bush, tall-growing, with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom, rising, delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle (a Fourth or Fifth Month miracle)
. . . and from this bush in the door-yard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms, and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig, with its flower, I break.

The lilac for *her*, the western star for you . . . and mine be the throat of the hermit thrust, a throat that bleeds as it

sings, a throat that, could it not sing, would bleed to death silently. . . .

IV

*In the swamp, in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.
Solitary, the thrush,
The hermit, withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.*

*Song of the bleeding throat!
Death's outlet song of life—(for well, dear brother, I know
If thou wast not gifted to sing, thou would'st surely die).*

In this inadequate symphony, I have finished the first movement. I have stated all three of my themes—lilac and star and thrush. The lamenting *largo* stands complete. Now must I sing *maestoso*, with beauty and majesty, my funeral march—my second movement a funeral march as in Beethoven's Third Symphony, composed to the memory and honoring of the Hero.

3

He wrote steadily, with few pauses and almost no alterations, the fifth and sixth sections, each an intricate, unbroken melodic curve, from, *Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities to, Night and day journeys a coffin;* and from, *Coffin that passes through lanes and streets to, I give you my sprig of lilac.* After some hesitation, he set down, at the opening of VII. the words:

(Nor for you, for one, alone . . .

But his final feeling was that this, by itself, left unguarded the door of their secret; and so, rather than erase anything

so true, he felt to enlarge it beyond the possibility of prying detection by the smooth (yet honest) sequent line:

Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring . . .)

Yes! that was honest! Blossoms and branches to *her* coffin, and her son's; to the coffin that enclosed the body of Floride's brother; to Joel Skidmore's coffin and to Selah Mulford's; to Oscar Wilber's; to each and to all. To the innumerable boxes of pine boards freshly cut that had been interred daily, North and South, and were interring now.

The confidence reposed in him by Lincoln tempted him to a dozen lines, which he numbered VIII., in which, with the symbol of the western star, he could recall their intimacy, their secret-sharing. . . . He set down a tentative IX.

In all this, he told himself, I am truly two persons; there is the Whitman who sings the stainless dead and there is the human person whom Lincoln trusted and tried to help; did so wonderfully help! And I am torn, this moment, between the two. . . . He wrote:

Sing on, there in the swamp!

O singer, bashful and tender! I hear your notes—I hear your call;

I hear—I come presently—I understand you;

*But a moment I linger—for the lustrous star has detain'd me;
The star, my comrade departing, holds and detains me.*

4

Following in his thought the musical analogy, the symphonic structure, or, condensed in form, the method of the sonata, he decided upon a re-statement and variation of his principal theme, the dead Lincoln. He did it, at the same

time enlarging the scope of his possible re-statement, by three lines, questioning:

*O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has
gone?
And what shall my perfume be, for the grave of him I love?*

And, resorting to inversion, with an immediate spontaneous echo he answered his last question first.

*Sea winds . . .
. . . with these, and the breath of my chant,
I perfume the grave of him I love.*

The merit of the loose analogy to music was in the freedom it gave; a freedom and looseness and largeness which could not be compassed in the imitation of any accepted model of verse. He would take advantage of this for the widest possible effect; at once; and with a variation so original as partly to constitute a new *motif*, a fourth theme:

*O what shall I hang on the chamber walls? . . .
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?*

At last, he had it! the full sweep of America, the splendor of all outdoors, the eternal cycle of day and night, to be fitly introduced as the sole worthy adornment of that burial-house, most consecrated of the nation. Now his mood changed to a sunny transport at the glimpse of wide horizons.

*In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a
wind-dapple here and there;*

The ecstasy, the exaltation such as he had never in composition before known, culminated in six lines which seemed

to him, as he re-read them, miraculous (I feel so quite humbly; I cannot conceive how I came to set down such a picture in so few strokes; but if I overvalue it, something may be forgiven me for the intensity with which I was moved as I wrote the words):

*Lo! the most excellent sun, so calm and haughty;
The violet and purple morn, with just-felt breezes;
The gentle, soft-born, measureless light;
The miracle, spreading, bathing all—the fulfill'd noon;
The coming eve, delicious—the welcome night, and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.*

. . . He stopped and sat motionless for an hour, from sheer exhaustion.

At length, resuming, he progressed with an interweaving of his material already present, venturing, however, another direct allusion to Esther—the most daring of all, it struck him, but he let it stand and even amplified it.

Then, with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, All will understand this to be Lincoln.

And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, May not some day, with finger pointing to that veiled and shadowy figure of you, Esther—may not some day there come one who will ask: “*Who is that?*” . . . But, no; he will not ask; something within him will give him the answer, unasked. . . .

And I, in the middle, as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions . . .

One last, cautious, identifying-revealing touch he permitted himself—the coincidence of his chant with the song of the thrush:

And the voice of my Spirit tallied the song of the bird.

He was ready to compose the *Death Carol*, to be followed by a short passage, *allegro furioso*, depicting the wreckage of the battlefields. A brief coda, or closing section, would complete the poem; my superbest, he said to himself in a weary whisper.

As a preliminary—for he could not finish now, but must have rest; though to hope for dreamless sleep was probably vain—he set down certain guiding lines. The *Death Carol* would begin with:

*Come, lovely and soothing Death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night . . .*

Embodied in this chant would be the line (initial line of one stanza, it was likely):

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet . . .

And, perhaps as the last line of all; anyway, very nearly, the last line of the whole poem:

Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul.

5

He hid away the sheets of paper and went out into the yard. The Fourth Month dawn was breaking.

On the lilac bush had blossomed only the single purple cluster.

He went to the bush and stood there, inhaling the fragrance. He lifted his face to the sky and cried out, shak-
only:

“ Oh, my dead! I try to answer! ”

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