

The Return of the Prodigal

The Thing Imagined

by Thomas Wolfe

Eugene Gant was a writer, and in the great world he had attained some little fame with his books. After a while, indeed, he became quite a famous person. His work was known, and everywhere he went he found that his name preceded him. Everywhere, that is, except where he would most have wished it—at home.

The reason for this anomaly was not far to seek. His first novel had been based in large measure upon a knowledge of people derived from his boyhood in a little town. When the book came out, the townspeople read it and thought they recognized themselves in portraits he had drawn, and almost to a man the town rose up against him. He received threatening letters. He was warned never to show his face again in the precincts from which his very life had sprung.

He had not expected anything like this, and the shock of it had a profound effect upon him. He took it hard. And for seven years thereafter he did not go home again. He became an exile and a wanderer.

And through all these seven years when he did not go back, his thoughts went back forever. At night as he walked the streets of distant cities or tossed sleepless in his bed in foreign lands, he would think of home, recalling every feature of the little town's familiar visage, and wondering what reception he would get at home if he should decide at last to visit again.

He thought of this often with the intensity of nostalgic longing that in the end his feelings built up in his mind an image which seemed to him more true than anything that he had ever actually experienced. After that it became an image that never varied. It came back to haunt him a thousand times—this image of what it would be like if he did go home again:

One blustery night toward the end of October a man was walking swiftly down a street in the little town of Altamont in the hill district of Old Catawba. The hour was late, and a small, cold rain was falling, swept by occasional gusts of wind. Save for this solitary pedestrian, the street was bare of life.

The street itself was one of those shabby and nondescript streets whereon the passage of swift change and departed grandeur is strikingly apparent. Even at this dreary season and hour it was possible to see that the streets had known a time of greater prosperity than it now enjoyed and that it had once been a pleasant place in which to live. The houses were for the most part frame structures in the style of that ugly, confused, and rather pretentious architecture which flourished forty or fifty years ago, and, so late at night, they were darkened and deserted looking. Many of them were set back in yards spacious enough to give an illusion of moderate opulence and security, and they stood beneath ancient trees, through the bare branches of which the wind howled mournfully. But even in the darkness one could see on what hard times the houses and the street had fallen. The gaunt and many-gabled structures, beaten and swept by the cold rain, seemed to sag and to be warped by age and disrepair, and to confer there dismally like a congress of old crones in the bleak nakedness of night and storm that surrounded them. In the dreary concealment of the dark, one knew by certain instinct that the old houses had fallen upon grievous times and had been unpainted for many years, and even if one's intuition had not

conveyed this, the strangely mixed and broken character of the street would have afforded telling evidence of the fate which had befallen it. Here and there the old design of pleasant lawns had been brutally deformed by the intrusion of small, cheap, raw, and ugly structures of brick and cement blocks. These represented a variety of enterprises: one or two were grocery stores, one was a garage, some were small shops which dealt in automobile accessories, and one, the most pretentious on the lot, was a salesroom for a motor car agency. In the harsh light of a corner lamp, broken by the stiff shadows of bare, tangled boughs, the powerful and perfect shapes of the new automobiles glittered splendidly, but in the splendor there was, curiously, a kind of terrible, cold, and desolate bleakness which was even more cruel, lonely, and forbidding than all the other dismal bleakness of the dark old street.

The man, who was the only evidence of life the street provided at this hour, seemed to take only a casual and indifferent interest in his surroundings. He was carrying a small suitcase, and from his appearance he might have been taken for a stranger, but his manner—the certain purpose in his stride, and the swift, rather detached glances he took from time to time at objects along the way—indicated that the scene was by no means an unfamiliar one but had at some period in his life been well known to him.

Arrived at length before an old house set midway down the street, he paused, set down his suitcase on the pavement, and for the first time showed signs of doubt and indecision. For some moments he stood looking with nervous and distracted intentness at the dark house as if trying to read upon its blank and gloomy visage some portent of the life within, or to decipher in one of its gaunt and ugly lineaments some answer to the question in his mind. For some time he stood this way, but at length, with an impatient movement, he picked up his suitcase, mounted the brief flight of concrete steps that went up to the yard, advanced swiftly along the walk and up the steps onto the porch, set down his suitcase at the door, and after a final instant of disturbed hesitancy shook his head, impatiently and almost angrily, and rang the bell.

The bell sent through the old dark hall within, lit dimly at the farther end by one small light, a sharp and vital thring of sound that drew from the man a shocked and involuntary movement, almost of protest and surprise. For a moment his jaw muscles knotted grimly; then, thrusting his hands doggedly into the pockets of his raincoat, he lowered his head and waited.

—They flee us who beforetime did us seek, with desolate pauses sounding between our chambers, in old chapters of the night that sag and creak and pass and stir and come again. They flee us who beforetime did us seek. And now, in an old house of life, forever in the dark mid-pause and watches of the night, we sit alone and wait.

What things are these, what shells and curios of outworn custom, what relics here of old, forgotten time? Festoons of gathered string and twines of thread, and boxes filled with many buttons, and bundles of old letters covered with scrawled and faded writings of the dead, and on a warped old cupboard, shelved with broken and mended crockery, an old wooden clock where Time his fatal, unperturbed measure keeps, while through the night the rats of time and silence gnaw the timbers of the old house of life.

A woman sits here among such things as these, a woman old in years, and binded to the past, remembering while storm shakes the house and all the festoons of hung string sway gently and the glasses rattle, the way the dust rose on a certain day, and the way the sun was shining, and

the sound of many voices that are dead, and how sometimes in these mid-watches of the night a word will come, and how she hears a step that comes and goes forever, and old doors that sag and creak, and something passing in the old house of life and time in which she sits alone.

The naked, sudden shock of the bell broke with explosive force against her reverie. The old woman started as if someone had spoken suddenly across her shoulder. Her swollen, misshapen feet were drawn quickly from the edge of the open oven door where she had been holding them for warmth, and glancing around and upward sharply with the sudden attentiveness of a startled bird, she cried out instinctively, although no one was there: "Hah? What say?"

Then, peering through her glasses at the wooden clock, she got up slowly, stood for a moment holding her broad, work-roughened hands clasped loosely at the waist, and after a few seconds' troubled indecision went out into the hall and toward the closed front door, peering uncertainly and with a puzzled, troubled look upon her face as she approached. Arrived at the door, she paused again, and still holding her hands in their loose clasp across her waist, she waited a moment in uncertain and troubled meditation. Then, grasping the heavy brass knob of the door, she opened it cautiously a few inches, and prying out into the dark with curious, startled face, she repeated to the man she saw standing there the same words she had spoken to herself in solitude a minute or two before: "Hah? What say?"—and immediately, with a note of sharp suspicion in her voice: "What do you want?"

He made no answer for a moment, but had there been light enough for her to observe the look upon his face, she might have seen him start and change expression, and be about to speak, and check himself with an almost convulsive movement of control. Finally he said quietly:

"A room."

"What's that?" she said, peering at him suspiciously and almost accusingly. "A room, you say?" Then sharply, after a brief pause: "Who sent you?"

The man hesitated, then said: "Someone I met in town. A man in the lunchroom. I told him I had to put up somewhere overnight, and he gave me your address." She answered him as before, repeating his words in the same suspicious manner, yet her tone also had in it now a certain quality of swift reflection, as if she were not so much questioning him as considering his words. "A man—lunchroom—say he told you?" she said quickly. And then instantly, as if for the first time recognizing and accepting the purpose of this nocturnal visit, she added: "Oh, yes! MacDonald! He often sends me people." "Well, come in," she said, and opened the door and stood aside for him to enter. "You say you want a room?" she went on now more tolerantly. "How long do you intend to stay?"

"Just overnight," he said. "I've got to go on in the morning."

Something in his tone awoke a quick and troubled recollection in her. In the dim light of the hall she peered sharply and rather painfully at him with a troubled expression on her face, and speaking with the same abrupt and almost challenging inquiry that had characterized her former speech but now with an added tinge of doubt, she said: "Say you're a stranger here?"—although he has said nothing of the sort. "I guess you're here on business, then?"

"Well—not exactly," he answered hesitantly. "I guess you could almost call me stranger, though. I've been away from here so long. But I came from this part of the country."

"Well, I was thinkin'," she began in a doubtful but somewhat more assured tone, "there was somethin' about your voice. I don't know what it was, but—" she smiled a tremulous yet

somewhat friendly smile— “it seemed like I must have heard it somewhere. I knew you must have come from somewhere around here. I knew you couldn’t be a Northern man—you don’t have that way of talkin’ Well, then, come in,” she said conciliatingly, as if satisfied with the result of her investigation, “if it’s only a room for the night you want, I guess I can fix you up. You’ll have to take things as you find them,” she said bluntly. “I used to be in the roomin’-house business, but I’m not young enough or strong enough to take the interest in it I once did. This house is gettin’ old and run-down. It’s got too big for me. I can’t look after it like I used to. But I try to keep everything clean, and if you’re satisfied with the way things are, why—” she folded her hands across her waist in a loose, reflective gesture and considered judiciously for a moment— “why,” she said, “I reckon you can have the room for fifty cents.”

“It’s little enough,” she thought, “but still it looks as if that’s about all he’s able to pay, an’ things have got to such a state nowadays it’s either take what you can get an’ get somethin’, or take nothin’ at all an’ lose everything. Yes, he’s a pretty seedy-lookin’ customer, all right,” she went on thinking. “A fly-by-night sort of feller if I ever saw one. But then I reckon MacDonald had a chance to size him up, an’ if MacDonald sent him, I guess it’s all right. An’, anyway, that’s the only kind that comes here nowadays. The better class all have their automobiles an’ want to get out in the mountains. An’ besides, no one wants to come to an old, cold, run-down sort of place like this if they can afford to go to a hotel. So I’d better let him in, I guess, an’ take what little he can pay. It’s better than nothin’ at all.”

During the course of this reflection she was peering through her glasses at him sharply and intently, and with a somewhat puzzled and troubled expression on her face. The figure that her old, worn, and enfeebled eyes made out in the dim, bleak light of the hall was certainly far from prepossessing. It was that of an uncommonly tall man, heavily built, and shabbily dressed in garments which were badly in need of pressing, and which, as she phrased it to herself, “looked as if he’d come the whole way across the country in a day coach.” His face was covered with the heavy black furze of a week-old beard, and although the features were neither large nor coarse, they had, somewhere in life, suffered a severe battering. The nose, which was short, tilted, and pugnacious-looking, had been broken across the ridge and was badly set, and there was a scar which ran slant-wise across the base of the nose. This disfigurement gave the man’s face a somewhat savage appearance, an impression which was reinforced by the look in his eyes. His eyes, which were brown, had a curiously harsh and dark and hurt look in them, as though the man had been deeply wounded by life and was trying to hide the fact with a show of fierce and naked truculence as challenging as an angry word.

Nevertheless, it was the cold anger in his eyes that somehow finally reassured the old woman. As he returned her prying stare with his direct and angry look, she felt vaguely comforted, and reflected: “Well, he’s a rough lookin’ customer, sure enough, but then he looks honest—nothin’ hangdog about him—an’ I reckon it’s all right.”

And, aloud, she repeated: “Well, then, come on. If you’re satisfied with things the way they are, I guess I can let you have this room here.”

Then turning, she led the way into a room which opened from the hall to the right and switched on the dingy light. It was a large front room, gaunt in proportions like the house, high-ceilinged, cheerless, bare and clean and cold, with white-washed walls. There was a black old fireplace, fresh-painted and unused, which gave a bleak enhancement to the cold white bareness

of the room. A clean but threadbare carpet covered the worn planking of the floor. In one corner there was a cheap dresser with an oval mirror, in another a small washstand with a bowl and pitcher and a rack of towels, and in the ugly bay window which fronted the street side of the house there was a nondescript small table covered with a white cloth. Opposite the door stood a clean but uninviting white iron bed.

The old woman stood for a moment with her hands clasped loosely at her waist as she surveyed the room with a reflective stare.

“Well,” she remarked at last with an air of tranquil and indifferent concession, “I reckon you’ll find it pretty cold in here, but then there’s no one in the house but one roomer an’ myself, an’ I can’t afford to keep fires burnin’ in a house like this when there’s nothin’ comin’ in. But you’ll find things clean enough,” she added quietly, “an’ there’s lots of good, warm covers on the bed. You’ll sleep warm enough, an’ if you’re gettin’ up to make an early start tomorrow, I don’t guess you’ll want to sit up late, anyway.”

“No ma’am,” he answered, in a tone that was at once harsh and hurt. “I’ll get along all right. And I’ll pay you now,” he said, “in case I don’t see you in the morning when I leave.”

He fished into his pockets for a coin and gave it to her. She accepted it with the calm indifference of old, patient, unperturbed people, and then remained standing there in a reflective pause while she gave the room a final meditative look before leaving him.

“Well then,” she said, “I guess you’ve got all you need. You’ll find clean towels on the washstand rack, and the bathroom’s upstairs at the end of the first hallway to the left.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he answered in the same tone as before. “I’ll try not to disturb anyone.”

“There’s no one to disturb,” she said quietly. “I sleep at the back of the house away from everything, an’ as for Mr. Gilmer—he’s the only steady roomer I’ve got left—he’s been here for years, an’ he’s so quiet I hardly know when he’s in the house. Besides, he sleeps so sound he won’t even know you’re here. He’s still out, but he ought to be comin’ in any minute now. So you needn’t worry about disturbin’ us. An’ no one will disturb you, either,” she said, looking straight at him suddenly and smiling the pale tremulous smile of an old woman with false teeth. “For there’s one thing sure—this is as quiet a house as you could find. So if you hear anyone comin’ in, you needn’t worry; it’s only Mr. Gilmer goin’ to his room.”

“Thank you,” the man said coldly. “Everything’s all right. And now,” he added, turning away as if anxious to terminate a more protracted conversation, “I’m going to turn in. It’s past your bedtime, too, and I won’t keep you up, ma’am, any longer.”

“Yes,” she said hastily, turning to go, yet still regarding him with a puzzled, indecisive look. “Well, then, if there’s anythin’ else you need—”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll be all right. Good night to you.”

“Good night,” she answered, and after one more parting glance around the cold walls of the room, she went out quietly and closed the door behind her.

For a moment after she was gone, the man stood motionless and made no sound. Then he looked about him slowly, rubbing his hand reflectively across the rough furze-stubble of his beard. His traveling gaze at length rested on his reflected image in the dresser mirror, and for a brief instant he regarded himself intently, with a kind of stupid and surprised wonder. And suddenly his features were contorted by a grimace as anguished and instinctive as a cornered animal’s.

Almost instantly, however it was gone. He ran his hands through his disheveled hair and shook his head angrily as though throwing off a hurt. Then quickly and impatiently he took off his coat, flung it down across a chair, sat down upon the bed, bent and swiftly untied his muddy shoes and removed them, and then sat there numbly in a stupor for some minutes, staring before him blindly at the wall. The cold, white bareness of the room stole over him and seemed to hold his spirit in a spell.

At length he stirred. For a moment his lips moved suddenly. Slowly he looked around the bare white walls with an expression of dawning recognition and disbelief. Then shaking his head and shrugging his thick shoulders with an involuntary and convulsive shudder, he got up abruptly, switched off the light, and without removing the rest of his clothes, lay down upon the bed and drew a quilt across his body.

And then, while storm beat against the house and cold silence filled it, he lay there, flat and rigid on his back, staring up with fixed eyes into blackness. But at last the drug of cold, dark silence possessed him, his eyes closed, and he slept.

In the old house of time and silence there is something that creaks forever in the night, something that moves and creaks forever, and that never can be still.

The man woke instantly, and instantly it was as if he had never slept at all. Instantly it was as if he had never been absent from the house, had never been away from home.

Strong, unreasoning terror gripped him, numb horror stole his breath, the cold, still silence laid its hand upon his heart. For in his brain it seemed a long-forgotten voice had just re-echoed, in his heart a word, and in his ear it seemed a footfall, soft and instant, had just passed.

“Is anybody there?” he said.

Storm beat about the house, and darkness filled it. There was nothing but cold silence and the million drumming hoof-beats of small rain.

“But I heard it!” his mind repeated. “I heard a voice now lost, belonging to a name now seldom spoken. I heard a step that passed here—that of a phantom stranger and a friend—and with it was a voice that spoke to me, saying the one word, ‘Brother!’”

“Is it the storm,” he said to himself, “that has a million voices? Is it the rain? Is it the darkness that fills an old house of life and gives a tongue to silence, a voice to something that moves and creaks forever in the night? Or is it the terror of cold silence that makes of my returning no return, and of me an alien in this house, where my very mother has forgotten me? Oh, is it the cold and living silence of strong terror moving in the house at night that stabs into the living heart of man the phantom daggers of old time and memory? Is there a tongue to silence and the dark?”

Light and instant as the rain a footfall passed above him. “Who’s there?” he said.

Storm beat upon the house, and silence filled it. Strong darkness prowled there, and the bare boughs creaked, and something viewless as the dark had come into the house, and suddenly he heard it again and knew that it was there.

Above his head, in Ben’s old room—the room of his brother, Ben, now dead these many years, and, like himself, forgotten, too—he heard a light, odd step, nimble as a bird’s, as soft as ashes, and as quick as rain.

And with the step he heard once more the old familiar voice, saying softly:

“Brother! Brother! ... What did you come home for? ... You know now that you can't go home again!”