

S4N

Issue 32 & Year 5
The First 64-Page Single Issue

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S·4·N

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GIRL IN WHITE



BEN SILBERT

A DIARY : FIRST AND LAST ENTRY

Naples, Hotel Azurra

FORTY YEARS AGO, when I was eight, I was taken to an eminent surgeon in regard to certain pains in my back. The great man told my mother after ten minutes' examination that I could not live a year. My mother assured me on the stairs that the doctor had spoken hopefully of my condition and after a lemonade we went home on the train. The flight of time proved that my mother's falsehoods are truer than a doctor's affidavit, for I passed several years without discomfort, reading in a bow-window. At the end of the first year I think my mother — who had ceased to be pretty on that day in the doctor's office — looked at me narrowly from time to time, wondering if it were worth while to have grown old suddenly in anticipation of a son's death that remained indefinitely remote. In due time the pains returned and I was led before a visiting German specialist who promptly despaired of my life. My mother's face in the elevator bore the same expression of encouraging solicitude, but there was a faint gleam

about the eyes that said that the expensive lemonade might be deferred until an authority more unmistakable than a Viennese degree had announced my extremity. I retired again to my window-seat, to emerge at intervals, and to stand with my mother beneath the vacant mirrors of many consulting rooms; from each interview my mother carried away decisive assurance of my death.

This morning the scene was re-enacted, though the heroine was far away. Bad as my French is, it at least served me in extracting from this filthy Neapolitan doctor the news that I have but six months to live. The verb *mourir* is irregular, but I found its future, and he solemnly nodded. Out of a complacency that was not pity he was willing to promise me a year, but I held him with my eyes (perhaps I had been drinking) until he gave me what he really believed. This time I too believed, the cunning little terrier; the wolf was not the less convincing for having been cried a dozen times. So I have six months to live and can start spending more freely the money I intended should last me a year. And of these six months I am going to keep a diary that I may examine with greater precision the curious life I am about to leave. If the world knew with what passionate

appraisal I am observing it, it would not choose this time to be trivial.

The first thing I did with my increased allowance was to go to dinner at Bertolini's. There sat the same Americans, South Americans and Germans; I was annoyed with myself for not having dressed, for they were not dressed either. I had a *compôte* Metternich, and a *faisan* Souvaroff, stuffed with truffles, breathing Madeira, and buttressed with mashed chestnuts, *Salade Pierre Courtin* and what not, each with its wedded wine. Oh, wines in procession, oh, wine, the whole weight of Greek and Christian symbolism do not do thee more than justice. My defiance and rage fell from me like the garments that children have put on in play. He who has once been happy is forever out of time's grasp.

"Be still a moment and you can hear the world falling through space!" was the frequent injunction of a schoolteacher of mine. Captured by the phrase the class would listen breathlessly to a silence slightly stained by the shouts of distant trains rushing into St. Louis. Tonight the world is falling through space like a cannon-ball that some genial admiral lets fly in amusing salute to the austerer planets. I sit high in bed and can hear the slip of the world as it turns and

turns, like a pullman taking a curve with a sigh. It is two o'clock in the morning and even the streets of Naples are quiet. Your Baptists have it that God, a round-shouldered old man in a white girdled robe after Blake, driven with concern for men, tirelessly follows their sleep and waking. They would picture him now going up all these little alleys, these filthy stairway-streets, counting families and making mental comments on the unaccountable inclinations of men. He has just passed through my walls. It is some credit to me that I do not take much of his time. He pats with amused indulgence the hillock of my feet. He likes me because I have broken myself of the habit of saying my prayers and no longer urge him to stop wars, and avert financial panics, and be gracious to my Aunt Cora, or endow me with this or another preposterous grace. He is warned that my importunity, made strong by long abstinence, may some day assault his peace and upset the economy of Heaven. We understand one another.

The intuition that is part of the primitive man in us keeps reminding me that there is a large body of water near, though I cannot hear a water-sound, hard as I try. This very minute about Procida the black water is lapping, and hollow

and chiming sounds are filling the caves of Sorrento. Inside me my expensive dinner is making interrogative noises, finding new corridors to push along and falling from level to level. Thoughts of lantern-groping God, of the quinine-minded author of Mandragola, of the threading earth, and these sensations of repletion have all but left me unconscious of the sharp pains that have been rending my side. At all events he who has once been happy is forever out of time's grasp.

THORNTON WILDER

CIRCLES

I am sick of circles,
Barring out, binding in,
Throwing me back upon myself,
Leading me nowhere.
I hunger for straight lines
Though they form a cross.

E. RALPH CHEYNEY

ANNE ZIMMERMAN:
MR. H. G. O'BRIEN AS ENDYMION

I

Could I sing here?

a song?

The white sun squints

Its glints

On the flagstones of the quai.

I have smouldered here too long.

ochre smoke gray

Speaking Sappho in a kitchenette,

Sallow leaves that thirst no more the sun

Tressed in a corone

Upon her forehead set.

White leghorn soul, you hover

In Third Republic walls.

A woman wailing for her demon lover;

The King gives one more of his famous balls;

And I have had my share of maiden blushes.

Oh, leave the rest unto the white rosebushes

That droop and sway, their green arms sweep-

[ing low,

Naked but for their tags in Parc Monceau.

My home, my castle! There the picture hangs
Painted by Hugo Gorovitch O'Brien,
"A Nude with Pickles or Orang-Outangs
With Critical Reactions to a Lion" —
My broad domesne.

The gracious lady mounted to her tower
And up from the green stretches of her land
Swept dreams of love in many a leafy bower.
The amorous sunlight played across her hand,
Whose pallor mocked the hawthorn of its
[whiteness,
To which the mountain snows are carnadine.
Winds moved her hair in drifts of tawny
[lightness;
Her eyes were luminous as stars in trine.
Once, twice she sighed, and thrice she sighed,
["Ah me!
He came a-riding from the West Country."

Twilight growing on the city,
Evening creeps along the quai —
Fool, Fool!
Rosemary, that's for remembrance.
The long mist stirs on the river,
restive uncoiling
cold smoke.

Fool, double fool!
Have I not builded you, Paris,
Grave masses superimposed,
Laid one against another —
And the river livid between,
Wormholed you
Like a maker of false antiques
With channels of footsteps and laughter,
With alleys of footsteps and eyes
That see not
And are seen
Only by my eyes?

I, the one thing subjective,
being like unto —

You, the One Thing Subjective.

Pelasgic glory this,
Laying block on looming block.

Psst! Stage properties in cardboard
and I have perforated them with rows of
[pinholes,
lights of tramways
boulevards
brothels
Café de la Paix.

Do you remember Marlowe in Ophelia,
Washed out
And her hair in vegetable wisps,
Rocking on her *grassouillettes* haunches
Like an upright squash
With a frazzled stem?

And he:
Meh father, meh mother, meh wit —
Meh,
 meh,
 me-e-e-e-eh!
A slate-black woolly ram.

CODICIL

This is but fluff and it will pass away,
Dried foam on hanks of meadow-grass:
The wind will stir and it will flake away,
Crumble unreminding from the sedges.
When the bitter grasses play,
Slashing at each other with their edges
Like lacing tongues of glass,
Dried sea-foam on the sedges
Is quickly whipped away.

II

I let my hair down to my princely lover.

or rather,

to the frivolous young man

(Son gigolo, c'est le cas de le dire)

with whom I live to keep from having a lover.

Finding in a pseudo-conjugality

a synthesis of the virginity

lost by accident

in the course of dispassionate experimentation,

Which,

more knowingly planned,

might have resulted

in the fixation of the maximum

depth

of Feminine Curiosity.

I

Hunting
horns

Daph - ne, Daphne,

echo

in the

valley,

the Moun -

tains.

O - O Daphne,
O-O Daphne

ho ei

ei

ho

ho

ei.

2

*Horns,
trumpets
and
drums*

Toréador, prends ga-a-a-arde
Et songe bien en com-

bat-

tant—

Ai, toro!

toro!

ai!

Upsplash of color,
quick restless points,
pricking points of color,
of cries.

the shafts of banderillos
clatter on livid horns.

ai toro!

ai, Madre de Dios!

toro

Lunge, fury mothered in iniquity
 en vente chez Loustalat,
 Boucherie Chevaline,
 7, rue de la Punaise.
Ai!
 cent sous le kilo! Ai!

3

Rise up, my lovely daughter,
The p'tits gris are on the thorn,
On Rhodanus' mottled water
Gleams the etiolated morn.
Rise and run before the hunters
Who pursue the Unicorn.

Alack, ma mère!
Nous n'irons plus au bois.
Strongly I opine
that even the King's unprecedented generosity
would scarcely work my rehabilitation —
 If yet I would.

4

Objective majesty of three black nuns
mounting the evening hill
against the stucco wall.

Do they know that there is also peace
in the lamplight city street
where the children play?

5

Liquescent (less it seemed a song
Than a euphonious echo from afar,
Through solitudes, from star to vibrant star,
Of one great name intoned by all the throng
Of lightning-visaged seraphim) awoke
A canorous threne for Laïs.

She enthroned
In porphyry, but drooped her head and moaned.
Flames licked the galls of her luxurious yoke,
And fold on fold, commiserate harmonies
Fell 'round her naked glory like a pall.

The blest quartet, the Tarsus shyster Saul,
Sappho and Oscar Wilde and Socrates,
Felicitous and technically chaste,
Bowed and regained their heavenly seats in haste.

“So deep a shame and such a sweet-faced girl.”

“Aspasia,” (stiff but facetious; formally acquitted from Harvard at a recent date; a presumption of lore gleaned from Radcliffe and Wellesley.)

No.
A radio-age Laïs,
Jane Austen out of stays,
Virginie deflowered and undrowned!
I, Anne Zimmerman, the —
 that is to say,
 the woman that lives with o'brien.

6

Nor damask
nor samite
being anything to boast of,
I proffered apologetically
Seven blades of grass and a plantain leaf,
Which substitution
was apparently acceptable in no one's eyes.

7

Endymion,
O blue-shaven and gaitered Endymion,
Put by your cigarette.
I drop my arms down to you.
I am the Lady Moon,
Artemis, automatically virgin.
My hair goes sifting down to you in beams,
Endymion,
For the fulfillment of tradition.

RAMON GUTHRIE

VOLTAGES

NOON I was absorbing the juices of the city again. A plate of red soup with pieces of onion in it from the girl whose big bosoms the truck drivers tried to maul the way they sprawled and munched their horse blankets, on which they sat on cooler days on the high driver's seat. I paddled the soup, looking for tomato seeds. They would hide between my teeth, defying sucking and an exploring tongue.

"The meat's good today."

"Sure. The boss sez tell 'em everything is good. Give 'em something else when they kick."

Then she laughed ten cent tip.

The boss gave me blueprint C-21-VI. Voltage test all afternoon and until eight o'clock on this circuit. The boss gave me blueprint D-4-IV. Voltage test from eight-thirty to ten-thirty.

"Keep off the streets where the substations are. If the boys know you're testing, they'll fake the voltage."

He told me that nineteen times before and I said all-right for the sixteenth time.

On the drunken trolley-car, I ruled my book and put my numbers down between reelings and lurches of sabotaging tramcar. The man with the whiskers next me watched, making speeches to say to me when I stopped ruling and numbering.

"You're with the B. E. company, aren't yew?"

"One year and three months."

"How d'ye like it?"

"Not at all."

"Why, if I had your chance, I'd consider myself very fortunate, young man. Ee-leck-tricity is a great thing."

"Oh, yes. Very great, but not to those who work with it."

"Why, young man, you have the opportunity of being another Edison right within your grasp."

"I don't want to be Edison. I want to be Rudolph Rittenhouse."

"Yes? Who is he? The name Rittenhouse is a great name."

"That's me."

"Oh, that's your name."

There were five blocks more for me to go. I rubbed his knees and passed out of the seat to the door. The whiskers trembled as the car jerked still and I was off.

1822 Brundage St. 1.06 p. m. A phase 229

114 115

The cellar smelled church on Saturday morning. A cat was going to have kittens over in the corner in the condensed milk can box that held 96 tins f.o.b. Reading.

1631 Spring Garden St. 1.26 p. m. B phase 237

119 118

The woman who let me into the cellar said that the last man had made suggestive remarks to the maid servant when she was alone, and that now she, the lady of the house, had made up her mind to be around when electric men came.

I asked whether electric men had made suggestive remarks to her since the maid no longer attended to these matters. Her negative answer had the aroma of disappointment, and I wondered what to suggest to her. She was perhaps forty-five and I went down the cellar steps and tested the voltages and forgot the woman when I went out.

She called after me to be sure to pull the outside door tight, and I answered, wishing her good-day.

Circuit D-4-IV was where the city is flat and the houses are few. I tested there once before and was nearly arrested by a detective who said I

must be a burglar because I walked flashing an electric torch. I went to a saloon where an effeminite cook served me soup with many vegetables in it, mostly large white beans. I bought two glasses of beer and got the soup and some bread without butter free. The cook, made polite by my clean, white, stiff collar, disturbed men in grey flannel shirts, who told me with looks that a grey shirt could fight better than a clean, white, stiff collar. The cat left the side of my chair when it discovered that I did not splash foods upon the sawdust for her to snap up and shake sawdust free from.

The hostile saloon was worse than the night outside on circuit D-4-IV. The engine that capered over the stone arched trestle down the street, flinging bright yellow blooms into houses that devoured the gleams of engine posies, was friendly more than grey shirts when one doesn't understand them. Engines are easy to be intimate with, but grey shirts have more gears than I could ever understand the meshing of.

While I tested crazy voltages on D-4-IV, winds had knocked the clouds about and trampled stars and moon streaks under thrusting feet and scrambling knees. My glasses quivered, perplexed to stay upon my nose or balloon out a jib at end

of golden chain lashed to my right ear with curved hook. Lightning smirked and thunder tittered to let me know what it could do at hearing distance only. The bushes summoned by oracular murmurs in miles-away clouds entered upon their dancing, swaying ritual. The storm laughed at the anæmic electric storm that pulsed upon the overcoated wires over which I was guardian for a night. Trees beat the wires to tell them of their insipidity, obeying officious winds, applauded by the thunder and encouraged by its chuckling and by the smiling of the flashes.

Cats had fled and birds uneasy knew the lightning was not the sun. Water splashed from out containers by reckless winds smacked my cheek with doubtful affection. I dodged into a house again to watch my tamed electric trickles and refused the household's invitation to stay away from storm. Circuit D-4-IV had to be finished because I had come to think that way in one year and three months.

The last reading was made before the storm had washed the streets from its exertion. An engine that would caper over the stone arched trestle down the street flinging bright yellow blooms unto houses. Before the sky should dim

its brilliant posies, I would be dragged behind it, dry and tired.

The tall weeds extended hands for me to join their carouse as I trotted down the pavement. When I paused for breath, branches touched my shoulder, bidding me to remain and give myself in abandon to a lascivious night with the storm.

My records had to be ready for the morning. In a year and three months I knew that this was so. Testing men always did that.

For my insolence, the wind whipped my glasses from my nose and they ballooned out a jib at end of golden chain lashed to my right ear with a curved hook.

The thunder chattered explanatory while I searched with the electric torch to find two glistening glasses that had joined the riot of the night. Perhaps the weeds were tossing them about, a symbol passed in ritual, hidden, as I searched, slapped to encouragement by investigating drops of rain. The bug that jumped upon the wrist that held the commanded torch was less disturbed than I whose instructions had made me understand small part better than the bug what lightning's thunder meant. My failure brought the titters from the sky that shook the

heavy-bellied creature into laughter, giving way to weeping that puddled on my back disdainfully.

The storm had deserted the city for the sea, and I made my report over again as I rested humid on my bed. Then I made the advertisement for the next day to ask the finder to notify Rudolph Rittenhouse that glasses which quivered perplexed to stay upon my nose, lashed to a tender golden chain, were found. I slept and entered cellars in my dreams as housewives stood on guard at cellar-stair thresholds, inquiring how bright my torch would be in such a darkened cavity.

The landlady said a man dressed in grey shirt was in the hall to see me. He handed me glasses attached to slender golden chain and bright hook that lashed around the ear.

"I am lucky. Here's a dollar. That's all I can give."

"I wouldn't take anything. I wear optics myself, so I know what these here things musta meant to you."

"Even so, let me repay you for your goodness."

"Ferget it." And he would have gone.

"Wait. I'm going out to get cigarettes. I'll walk a ways with you."

I told him that it was good that we were not having a storm again tonight and he never answered.

"I'm a track-repairer," he said.

"Where are you working now?"

"Up around Sembert Park, where you lost your glasses, pullin' old rails. I used to be a blacksmith, but that was long ago when there were more horses. I don't know nuthin' about these ortermobiles that's shoed with rubber."

He went naturally to the saloon on the corner with me to have beer. The beer splashed his optics. He talked about rails and steel, and wrought-iron. Explained that hand-forges had a way about them that was strange; but many blacksmiths soon learned their temperaments. Men, he said, could never be handled like a forge because they had no temperament. He remarked that what they say in life are dispositions of men, are only ways of being stupid.

Engines are easy to be intimate with, but grey shirts have more gears than I could ever understand the meshing of.

MARSHALL D. BEUICK

IMPROVISATION

If I were a peacock
I would watch you
With a thousand eyes

If I were a centipede
I would track you
With an hundred feet

If I were an octopus
I would hold you
With eight arms

If I were a cat
I would love you
During nine lives

If I were a god
I would possess you
In three persons

LOUIS GILMORE

JIMMY FITZGIBBONS

ATTACHMENT is not a difficult thing with us humans. It is not so hard to be kind to another. It requires no effort to love your fellow-man. It is the easiest of virtues to be good. It is simple and yet wonderful.

I worked together with a man called Jim Fitzgibbons. To the fellows he was Jimmy; to the foreman, Gibbons; I used to call him Mr. Fitzgibbons; and here we shall refer to him as Jimmy Fitzgibbons.

I had to mister him. He was twenty-eight years my senior. And, when I said "Mr. Fitzgibbons", the man looked back with pride and appreciation, and I felt glad that I gave him this respect.

Do we know the people with whom we are daily rubbing shoulders? Hardly. Not because man is shy. Not because we are always on the fly, too busy to take notice of one another. We don't know our neighbors because it seldom occurs to us to take the trouble. We are never fully awake to our surroundings. Our senses are closed. Our consciousness stays sluggish and indifferent. We are led along by habit, repetition, imitation. We

are seldom inspired. The delight of exhilaration is unknown to us. And so, tapping only the surface of life, aware only of the outer crust of everyday possibilities, we stumble along, unknowing and unknown. But one day he of whom we had never taken notice smiles to us in a certain way; his smile enters us, for we happened to be at that moment in a receptive mood; and behold! we discover a human being, a friend, a brother.

I had succeeded in penetrating Jimmy Fitzgibbons. Perhaps there wasn't much to penetrate in him. His was not a nature of backgrounds and moods. He was simple, a jolly good Irishman, a man who should have worn skirts, so feminine, so good-natured, so harmless was he. But I had to find this out, and then Jimmy became to me dearer than a father, more cherishable than a sweetheart. I admired Jimmy.

We worked both on a dock along the Hudson. Days of youth, days of freedom, days of happiness. Light, gay, laughing days they were. The sky, the Hudson, the spring breeze, the dreams amidst derricks, machines, wheelbarrows, mud, steel and iron.

Here Jimmy and I went along together. Jimmy forty-seven, I nineteen. There was something in this contrast of age that kept us close. We en-

joyed an equal degree of prominence among the men, Jimmy being the oldest and I the youngest of them. Then I was slim and he so vast and bulky. There were shelter and protection in the man's person. He had lived; at least he had attained the self-confident poise of one who had lived; and how his pleasant steadiness and flat-footed, untroubled gait soothed one's untried, unbalanced, expectantly-vibrating, nervous being! I felt at ease with Jimmy Fitzgibbons, as one feels with sunny, smiling mother-nature.

Can you picture Jimmy to yourself? Here he is, a real, living human being. Let us follow him as he rocks slowly and heavily ahead, some rusty long rods of iron balancing upon his soft, down-sloping shoulders. Jimmy can carry a much heavier weight than what he carries now, but we will forgive his fakerism. Jimmy likes to conserve his strength; well, let him. Good, robust, non-harming strength must not be wasted. And so we see Jimmy, with head large and flattened, almost no neck, and colossal, round shoulders, plodding along. He looks neither to the right nor to the left. Gods knows where he is looking. We are content to walk in Jimmy's footsteps, for Jimmy cannot lead one astray.

Now he is facing us, and we see, to begin with, his gray, small, catlike eyes beaming upon us. We may take notice of his ridiculously tiny ears and we cannot overlook the disheveled wisps of yellow hair pressed close upon his narrow forehead by a tattered, tight, adventurous-looking cap. His cheeks are rosy, his nose a gay, good, Irish one. His breast is exposed; Jimmy has a double breast, and it is high and powerful, overgrown with a black and bushy tangle of hair. The hands that were grasping the rods are large, but the fingers are thick and small. Those hands had not yet done their maximum of labor. But who cares? If one should take Jimmy and place him on all fours, he would portray a near resemblance to a splendid, well-fed pig.

This, then, was Jimmy Fitzgibbons.

Well, I liked him. I should have enjoyed playing with him. He seemed to have been made to be somebody's plaything. I would sometimes think that, if ever I got rich, I would take Jimmy over to me and make him happy for the rest of his life. In my estimation he deserved it. Don't you know how we all find pleasure in being with healthy, foolish people, people who do not sicken us with complaints of suffering but inspire us with the cheer and soundness of their calm and easy dis-

position. Well, Fitzgibbons did that to me, aside from everything else. He never looked worried. He never appeared to think. His mind stood forever quietly at rest. And he never took anything to heart, nor got excited over anything, and whatever he was asked to do he did at such little expense to himself you would, on a glance, think that the man would live to be a hundred, and then go on living still. At forty-seven he looked no more than thirty.

The effect of his remarkably oblong, smiling eyes and incomparably carefree manner of carrying himself upon the mind was like the effect of a fresh, glaring snow some bright, frosty winter morning. He infected me with his buoyancy; he made me feel the way he himself felt. It was a matter of mental and physical relief to watch this boyishly self-confident, ignorant man go about his work and not mind any one around him. Oh, I enjoyed him. I liked to see him eat. His yellow little teeth dancing along, grinding away, rapidly, rapidly, filled me with pleasurable sensations. I could have watched him for hours. I began bringing him apples, chew-tobacco. He accepted these, saying, "Thank you, kid," and gazing at me with critical admiration. He was probably then conscious of his influence over me, and the next time

he was given a job he picked me as his mate. He would make the most lenient senior partner. He hated work for himself and felt a desire to spare others. But if there was something to be done he himself did it, saying to me, with the air of an elder brother, his eye winking the while:

"That's all right. You just sit and look wise."

Or we would go around the yard in make-believe search for work. Jimmy trudged ahead. He took his time. Really, why hurry? Lots of time, lots of time. Jimmy was afraid of no one. The yard was his and he could do anything he wanted. But there comes an overseer, a big fellow, one whom everybody fears. And now Jimmy gets busy. I too. I am sorry for Jim. But to him the incident means nothing. The overseer gone, he turns to me, spits sideways, and remarks confidentially:

"You dowannu be afraid o' them big bosses."

I follow in his back and laugh. I like him best at these moments, overgrown good boy that he is.

Now one day something terrible happened. I was busy unbolting engines that had come to us for repair. Suddenly some distant shouts of warning startled me from my work. "Look out! look out!" a mingling of voices echoed at once. I looked up, and was about to run forward...

No one and nothing stirred... I saw Fitzgibbons, small and bewildered, like a trapped rat... My heart fell first, and right after it the sombre machine from the derrick... on Jimmy's shoulders.

I turned my head away. A horrible panic possessed me. Then I experienced something indescribably revolting. I fled from the yard, like a maniac. Death itself, together with its sickening inevitability, were pursuing me. I nearly fainted in the street.

MAX ROBIN

INSOLENCE

A poet's brain is a scrambled egg
dreaming in a dish.

A monster manipulates a fork composed
of city streets
and then...

A tiny morsel of egg
adheres to his lower lip
provokingly.

HARRY F. PRELLER

GESTURES

Was a man once right men tagged
Mountebank, clown, buffoon,
Wiggled his ears, whittled little sticks,
Thumbed his nose at the moon,
Did all manner of preposterous tricks.

Was a man once right men tagged
Longhead, superman, sage,
Wrinkled his brow, pulled little strings,
Thumbed his nose at the age,
Did all manner of preposterous things.

Were these two, parcelled and tagged,
Tied so brother and brother,
Wiggled his ears, wrinkled his brow,
Winked each an eye at the other.

BASIL THOMPSON

TO A DEAD CITIZEN

He was the finest of our happy men;
He had all joys, he never thought of death;
Sometimes he fiddled with his mind, and then
Shook off a tremor like a nervous wren —
Just once or twice I saw him catch his breath.

Or in the shimmering clatter of the streets,
Or shaking hands, or tying his cravat,
He was the quick intelligent fool one meets
Without an afterthought of charnel sheets:
He never looked at things as This or That.

I saw him once again. It was too late;
His round-eyed wife was sad — I didn't know,
For I was out of town and it was fate
That I should get a message on that date
And hurry back to town to see the show.

There at the church they took him through the
[door,
His sweet wide mouth much as it was before,
And no one wept more bitterly than his whore.

ALLEN TATE

A JOYFUL DE PROFUNDIS

E. E. CUMMINGS' *The Enormous Room* [BONI & LIVERIGHT] is an account of the author's experiences during his unjust confinement in a retreat maintained by the benevolent French government for persons suspected of obstructing the progress of the war. The book is therefore likely to be meticulously avoided by readers who have incautiously suffered the pangs of spirit commonly inflicted by works on the Great Subject, such as the memoirs of generals, premiers, and correspondents and the treatises of historians, economists, and idealists. In this instance, as in the case of *Three Soldiers*, a generally sound instinct serves to lead the reader astray, for Cummings' book, while quite as interesting psychologically as Dos Passos', is, in addition, a most amusing performance and full of a ribald and unquenchable humor. It is beautifully written, in good prose of divers sorts appropriate to the varied subject matter; plentifully besprinkled with French expressions never met with in conversation classes; free from cant or complaining; and pregnant with a neglected moral. This moral may be expressed as the

conviction that the insupportable feature of modern conflict, the real reason why war is hell is simply the inevitable elevation of inferior persons to positions of authority. The beneficent laws of supply and demand, the survival of the fittest, free competition, are temporarily repealed, with the result that potential and even actual boot-blacks, factory foremen, and drummers often become commanders of various grades, Y.M.C.A. officials, members of examining commissions, and superintendents of prison camps, in spite of all efforts to sort out officers and men on a basis of intelligence. The natural outcome is petty tyranny, persecution, and a trampling of the finer instincts unbearable by men who can face with a laugh the material terrors which so inflame the imagination of the pacifist.

If I thus take the liberty of deriving a moral concept from the book, it should in justice be stated that such was not at all the author's pre-occupation in writing it; rather he attempted an æsthetic enterprise — in the main a series of characterizations. In this endeavor Cummings is brilliantly successful. You will seek far to find such a gallery of human beings, sympathetically and sharply delineated in brief, witty, and deeply moving or viciously cutting strokes. The heroism

of *les putains*, "frail" ladies full of the high spirit of adventure and resistance; simple-minded and lovable Jean le Nègre, dusky Don Juan of the depths; the puritanical little Belgian mechanic, whose contemptuous classification of the women finally broke down completely as new light on old concepts was vouchsafed; The Fighting Sheeney, prize blackguard of the entire works; Le Chapeau, The Trick Raincoat, The Frog, Apollyon, The Wanderer, the roaring *plantons* (guards), The Author.

In the course of these characterizations and in the description of the material background the author ventures far into rarified regions sacred to Comstock, Sumner, and Justice Ford; so far, in fact, that I am impelled to set down certain considerations pertinent to the subject. The obscene, it seems to me, is to be recognized as such by virtue of two elements, the amatory and the excretory, treated in a manner undignified, flippant, or humorous; characterized by one or both of these elements, it holds a considerable place in life as really lived, from the physiology of every day to the sublimations of art and religion. The older authors frankly recognized this fundamental, and thus their most extravagantly imaginative works related to actuality

with a sharpness foreign to an effete later age of convention and inhibition. It required the mastodonic strength, the mighty wallowings of Zola to overwhelm these gradually constricting bonds of artificiality and to demonstrate anew that the subject-matter of the novel need have no conventional bounds.* As a result, the obscene, tempered by the dictates of good taste, has assumed again its ancient place in literature, though not without suffering occasional assaults from an inhuman and often hypocritical censorship. I point, by way of example, to the writings of Anatole France and James Branch Cabell, and, to descend somewhat in the scale of talent and taste, of Dreiser and Cummings. It appears to me that obscenity in literature produces one of

*I cannot let pass this opportunity of expressing my lack of sympathy with the current fad of belittling the genius of Zola. Despite the defects of his work, now apparent to all, there remains in the mind of one who reads any considerable proportion of it a profound impression, which, though difficult to define in exact terms, is of the essence of grandeur. The effect is vivid and terrible; false to some small details of life, perhaps, but alive with insight and an almost instinctive feeling for the protoplasmic monstrousness of humanity. Certainly *Germinal* is one of the greatest of all exudates from the imagination of man; it is so far beyond such trifling "masterpieces" of the moment as *Lady into Fox*, *Holiday*, and *The Lost Lady* that comparison is utterly ridiculous. Cummings, whether he is pleased to hear it or not, suffers less in such a likening.

two very distinct effects, depending on rather subtle differences in manner: the result may be poisonous, greenish, bloodless, and altogether unpleasant; or robustly wholesome, crimson, agreeably pulsing with underlying animalism of humanity. In some of his poems Cummings undoubtedly achieves effect No. 1; in *The Enormous Room* he completely succeeds with No. 2, in spite of occasional touches of the first. But enough of this subject, which cannot be blinked, however distressing to the finer sensibilities, if we are to attempt a just appraisal of our peculiar fledgling of Harvard.

In considering the more seemly matter of literary style, as exemplified in Cummings' writings, I feel again a sharp distinction between the poems and the novel. From the former I gather the impression of one who has nothing much to say — nothing much, that is, suited to the medium of verse — but who strives to say it in accents new and strange, provocative of coarse mirth rather than sympathetic understanding, and full of all manner of modern cheapness. As often as not words are used quite without meaning in the context, as if the author had embraced the æsthetic theory that painting should express ideas or sensations without representation and

that writing should represent patterns and forms without ideation. In the novel, on the contrary, there is little of all this; only here and there do we come upon a passage of deliberate incoherence, apparently tentative and certainly incongruous — perhaps a sporadic effort to practise the dubious theory enunciated on page 249: to wit, that through the discarding of all the fruits of tradition and education “a minute bit of personal Feeling” may be attained. “Which minute bit is Art.” For the most part sentences have a normal construction and words have their normal meanings, with no sacrifice of variety, spontaneity or shading. In brief, the author displays a very respectable literary ability, and in this narrative has to his credit a work of well rounded excellence. I venture to hope that Cummings will not expend his whole strength in the effort to write poetry in which new and ugly rubber stamps are substituted for the old and beautiful; let him devote some of his time to the composition of a new novel of imaginative realism — not so obviously dependent as was *The Enormous Room* upon a particular experience.

H. M. PARSHLEY

ANOTHER NOVEL

If one is thirsty, one is very acutely aware of the pleasures and satisfactions of drink. If one's bank account stands at zero, one is impressed (and perhaps depressed) by the power of money. In a similar way, the complete absence of style in Wayland Williams' third novel, *Family* (STOKES), reminds me insistently of the pleasures, satisfactions and power of style. His deficiency further reminds me that the one indisputably permanent element in a work of literary art is style.

This is the way he writes:

An oriole flashed across the garden, a moving high light of the whole June afternoon. It caught the eye of Mrs. Deere; she looked up from her embroidery, smiling slightly, and gave a short sigh of pure content. (p. 3)

Everything was bathed in moonlight. (p. 31)

There was a silence, a pause of absorption, as when an acid slowly works into a tissue and reduces it gradually to its own medium. (p. 268)

These are representative excerpts: and I defy any one with any experience in reading to take a fresh reaction to their cadences or images. Is there anything in them that distinguishes Williams

above hundreds of other writers who state that their characters give sighs of pure content or that a landscape is bathed in moonlight or that a certain tense silence is like an acid working into a tissue?

De Gourmont declared that "if there were an art of writing, it would be nothing more or less than the art of feeling, the art of seeing, the art of hearing, the art of using all the senses, whether directly or through the imagination; and the new, serious method of a theory of style would be an attempt to show how these two separate worlds — the world of sensations and the world of words — penetrate each other. There is a great mystery in this, since they lie infinitely far apart — that is to say, they are parallel. Perhaps we should see here the operation of a sort of wireless telegraphy. We note that the needles on the two dials act in unison, and that is all. But this mutual dependence is, in reality, far from being as complete and as clear as in a mechanical device."

But can Williams be said to have any sensations peculiarly his own? Art is a union of the special and the general, but Williams's senses convey nothing to the reader but the general . . . "the gray chill of the morning" (p. 307). His world of sensations is dead.

In the quoted passage, De Gourmont indicates the crux of the problem of style. But it was Stendhal who supplied a working formula for this crux, — the interrelation between the world of personality and the world of words. "Style," he said, "is this: to add to a given thought all the circumstances fitted to produce the whole effect that the thought ought to produce." And by "thought" he meant, as Middleton Murry interprets him, "a general term to cover intuitions, convictions, perceptions, and their accompanying emotions before they have undergone the process of artistic expression or ejection."

Very well. Now look at the first excerpt I clipped from *Family*. The given "thought" here was "Mrs. Deere is in a state of pure content". To this given "thought" Williams adds the following circumstances: a garden, a June afternoon, an oriole flashing across the garden (how many thousand writers have seen birds "flashing"!), Mrs. Deere working at embroidery. Up to this point nothing determines very strongly what Mrs. Deere's state of being is. She may be bored, or distressed, or sleepy, or joyous or in a thousand other moods. But Williams says that she is "smiling slightly" and gives a "short

sigh". These are, it is true, sometimes signs of contentment, though a slight smile and a short sigh might well preface the statement that Mrs. Deere is pitying herself benevolently and feels a little weary. But no, these two not sharply focussed details are intended to externalize for us her state of pure content. We are supposed to feel vividly from these two circumstances plus the less direct preceding descriptive details the contentedness of this "sea-green incorruptible", as she is called later. Is it not rather flat and tasteless, are not the needle on the dial of words and the needle on the dial of sensory perceptions both pointing at zero?

Occasionally Williams does make a feeble effort to break through the crust of received notions, images, ideas, sensations which has buried his nervous system, and we have what is by comparison with the unanimated level of his prose a "purple patch". In this description of a prizefight one can detect a faint individual activity of his own vision and feeling.

A large square hall, dark, lined to the ceiling with men, visible as dark splotches with smaller light splotches that were faces. Here and there this mass was continually lit up by the orange flare of a match. In the center, under a shaded yellow light, the only light in the building during the bouts, was the raised canvas-floored square, surrounded by red

plush ropes slung from posts. And in the ring the worried, stooping, ever-moving referee, and the two beautiful nearly naked figures. And applause, and a continual fire of remarks, sometimes amusing, always spontaneous and staccato.

But this is to the sporting prose of Grantland Rice as the prose of Ernest Poole is to that of Flaubert.

GORHAM B. MUNSON

AS I LIKE IT

I HAVE read *Family* with much interest and admiration. It is a good story well told. The characters are original creations and recognizably human. The interest of the reader is maintained not so much by surprise in the incidents as by the development of the characters, for the persons in the story really develop and seem to develop naturally. This story is such a distinct advance on the previous novels of its author that it is my conviction that Williams has made a place for himself in contemporary fiction.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

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|||||

IN LEAGUE WITH THE LITERATI

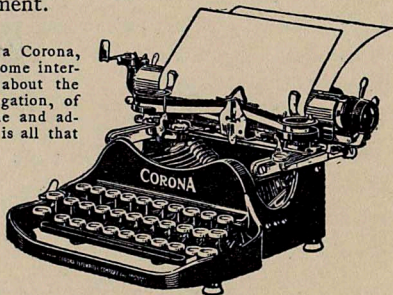
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See page 20 of this issue.

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THE SIGN POST

"To Heaven," "To Hell," so said the guiding fingers;
I looked to right, to left, around, above:
The self-same path it was to which both pointed;
Then saw I that the road was sexual love.

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NOTES

Announcement

S4N inaugurates its fifth year by doubling pagination, raising issuely print to 2000 copies, opening its pages to paid ads and going on public sale at three hundred of the best book shops in America and European capitals. To insure success and regular monthly appearance we shall need *now* the help of *every S4N-er* in procuring *new paid-up* subscribers and *cash* advertisers.

The Issue 26-29 Competition

Tied for first place: Ramon Guthrie and Wayland Williams. For second: Malcolm Cowley, James Daly, F. T. Marinetti and Arthur H. Nethercot. Four of these must be chosen for our editorial board. Vote, if you haven't. Final choice, with comments, will be printed in Issue 33.

Contributors to this Issue

BEN SILBERT, a young Jew from Chicago, has exhibited in Paris and elsewhere.

E. RALPH CHEYNEY, author of *I, A Minor Poet*, has contributed to *Bowling Green*, *Public Ledger*, *N. Y. Call*, *Nomad*, *Much Ado*, *Masses*, *Pagan* and *Modernist*.

MARSHALL D. BEUICK writes: "Arthur Moss had the indecency to publish one of my stories in *Gargoyle*, and I have been regarded with a disdainful and suspicious eye by *Smart Set*, *Double Dealer* and *Dial*, not to mention many other periodicals which publish lit-trit-chur and poy-tree.

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(For rates see page 62)

I did several stories for the (at that time) rather appreciative *Evening Post*, the *World* did me an occasional honor, *La France*, and that's about all." His contribution to this issue is a chapter from a novel, *Havens*, which has been turned down by four publishers and liked by John Dos Passos.

HARRY F. PRELLER, formerly editor and publisher of *Cauldron*, has contributed to *Brief Stories*, *Breezy Stories*, *Palms*, etc.

BASIL THOMPSON, a *Double Dealer* editor, has contributed to *Nation*, *Forum*, *Pagan*, *Lyric*, *Smart Set*, etc.

ALLEN TATE, a *Fugitive* editor, is co-author, with Ridley Wills, of *The Golden Mean*.

H. M. PARSHLEY, zoölogist at Smith College, antisocialist, antiprohibitionist and antiseccessionist, has contributed to *American Mercury*, *Literary Review* and numerous scientific publications.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS needs no introduction.

THORNTON N. WILDER, RAMON GUTHRIE, LOUIS GILMORE, MAX ROBIN and GORHAM B. MUNSON are already known to *S4N* readers.

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I, A Minor Poet, poems by E. Ralph Cheyney.

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Jennifer Lorn, a sedate extravaganza by Elinor Wylie.

Parson's Pleasure, poems by Christopher Morley.

Wife of the Centaur, a novel by Cyril Hume.

FROM L'EFFORT MODERNE:

Le Néo-Plasticisme, by P. Mondrian.

FROM THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY:

The Art of Cineplastics, by Elie Faure.

Dream Fugue, poems by Charlotte Hardin.

Love and Laughter, an anthology of love poetry edited by Matthew Prothero.

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