

# LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL

*A Story of the Buried Life*

BY  
THOMAS WOLFE

*"At one time the earth was probably a white-hot sphere like the sun."*

—TARR AND McMURRY



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TO  
A. B.

*"Then, as all my soules bee,  
Emparadis'd in you, (in whom alone  
I understand, and grow and see,  
The rasters of my body, bone  
Being still with you, the Muscle, Siner, and Veine,  
Which tile this house, will come againe."*

## TO THE READER

*This is a first book, and in it the author has written of experience which is now far and lost, but which was once part of the fabric of his life. If any reader, therefore, should say that the book is "autobiographical" the writer has no answer for him: it seems to him that all serious work in fiction is autobiographical—that, for instance, a more autobiographical work than "Gulliver's Travels" cannot easily be imagined.*

*This note, however, is addressed principally to those persons whom the writer may have known in the period covered by these pages. To these persons, he would say what he believes they understand already: that this book was written in innocence and nakedness of spirit, and that the writer's main concern was to give fulness, life, and intensity to the actions and people in the book he was creating. Now that it is to be published, he would insist that this book is a fiction, and that he meditated no man's portrait here.*

*But we are the sum of all the moments of our lives—all that is ours is in them: we cannot escape or conceal it. If the writer has used the clay of life to make his book, he has only used what all men must, what none can keep from using. Fiction is not fact, but fiction is fact selected and understood, fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose. Dr. Johnson remarked that a man would turn over half a library to make a single book: in the same way, a novelist may turn over half the people in a town to make a single figure in his novel. This is not the whole method but the writer believes it illustrates the whole method in a book that is written from a middle distance and is without rancour or bitter intention.*

***PART I***

*. . . a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door.  
And of all the forgotten faces.*

*Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we  
did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh  
have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison  
of this earth.*

*Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked  
into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever  
prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?*

*O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on  
this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speech-  
lessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end  
into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?*

*O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.*

# LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL!

## I

A DESTINY that leads the English to the Dutch is strange enough; but one that leads from Epsom into Pennsylvania, and thence into the hills that shut in Altamont over the proud coral cry of the cock, and the soft stone smile of an angel, is touched by that dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world.

Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas.

The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every moment is a window on all time.

This is a moment:

An Englishman named Gilbert Gaunt, which he later changed to Gant (a concession probably to Yankee phonetics), having come to Baltimore from Bristol in 1837 on a sailing vessel, soon let the profits of a public house which he had purchased roll down his improvident gullet. He wandered westward into Pennsylvania, eking out a dangerous living by matching fighting cocks against the champions of country barnyards, and often escaping after a night spent in a village jail, with his champion dead on the field of battle, without the clink of a coin in his pocket, and sometimes with the print of a farmer's big knuckles on his reckless face. But he always escaped, and coming at length among the Dutch at harvest time he was so touched by the plenty of their land that he cast out his anchors there. Within a year he married a rugged young widow with a tidy farm who like all the other Dutch had been charmed by his air of travel, and his

grandiose speech, particularly when he did Hamlet in the manner of the great Edmund Kean. Every one said he should have been an actor.

The Englishman begot children—a daughter and four sons—lived easily and carelessly, and bore patiently the weight of his wife's harsh but honest tongue. The years passed, his bright somewhat staring eyes grew dull and bagged, the tall Englishman walked with a gouty shuffle: one morning when she came to nag him out of sleep she found him dead of an apoplexy. He left five children, a mortgage and—in his strange dark eyes which now stared bright and open—something that had not died: a passionate and obscure hunger for voyages.

So, with this legacy, we leave this Englishman and are concerned hereafter with the heir to whom he bequeathed it, his second son, a boy named Oliver. How this boy stood by the roadside near his mother's farm, and saw the dusty Rebels march past on their way to Gettysburg, how his cold eyes darkened when he heard the great name of Virginia, and how the year the war had ended, when he was still fifteen, he had walked along a street in Baltimore, and seen within a little shop smooth granite slabs of death, carved lambs and cherubim, and an angel poised upon cold phthisic feet, with a smile of soft stone idiocy—this is a longer tale. But I know that his cold and shallow eyes had darkened with the obscure and passionate hunger that had lived in a dead man's eyes, and that had led from Fenchurch Street past Philadelphia. As the boy looked at the big angel with the carved stipe of lilystalk, a cold and nameless excitement possessed him. The long fingers of his big hands closed. He felt that he wanted, more than anything in the world, to carve delicately with a chisel. He wanted to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone. He wanted to carve an angel's head.

Oliver entered the shop and asked a big bearded man with a wooden mallet for a job. He became the stone cutter's apprentice. He worked in that dusty yard five years. He became a stone cutter. When his apprenticeship was over he had become a man.

He never found it. He never learned to carve an angel's head. The dove, the lamb, the smooth joined marble hands of



death, and letters fair and fine—but not the angel. And of all the years of waste and loss—the riotous years in Baltimore, of work and savage drunkenness, and the theatre of Booth and Salvini, which had a disastrous effect upon the stone cutter, who memorized each accent of the noble rant, and strode muttering through the streets, with rapid gestures of the enormous talking hands—these are blind steps and gropings of our exile, the painting of our hunger as, remembering speechlessly, we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, a door. Where? When?

He never found it, and he reeled down across the continent into the Reconstruction South—a strange wild form of six feet four with cold uneasy eyes, a great blade of nose, and a rolling tide of rhetoric, a preposterous and comic invective, as formalized as classical epithet, which he used seriously, but with a faint uneasy grin around the corners of his thin wailing mouth.

He set up business in Sydney, the little capital city of one of the middle Southern states, lived soberly and industriously under the attentive eye of a folk still raw with defeat and hostility, and finally, his good name founded and admission won, he married a gaunt tubercular spinstress, ten years his elder, but with a nest egg and an unshakable will to matrimony. Within eighteen months he was a howling maniac again, his little business went smash while his foot stayed on the polished rail, and Cynthia, his wife—whose life, the natives said, he had not helped to prolong—died suddenly one night after a hemorrhage.

So, all was gone again—Cynthia, the shop, the hard-bought praise of soberness, the angel's head—he walked through the streets at dark, yelling his pentameter curse at Rebel ways, and all their indolence; but sick with fear and loss and penitence, he wilted under the town's reproving stare, becoming convinced, as the flesh wasted on his own gaunt frame, that Cynthia's scourge was doing vengeance now on him.

He was only past thirty, but he looked much older. His face was yellow and sunken; the waxen blade of his nose looked like a beak. He had long brown mustaches that hung straight down mournfully.

His tremendous bouts of drinking had wrecked his health.

He was thin as a rail and had a cough. He thought of Cynthia now, in the lonely and hostile town, and he became afraid. He thought he had tuberculosis and that he was going to die.

So, alone and lost again, having found neither order nor establishment in the world, and with the earth cut away from his feet, Oliver resumed his aimless drift along the continent. He turned westward toward the great fortress of the hills, knowing that behind them his evil fame would not be known, and hoping that he might find in them isolation, a new life, and recovered health.

The eyes of the gaunt spectre darkened again, as they had in his youth.

All day, under a wet gray sky of October, Oliver rode westward across the mighty state. As he stared mournfully out the window at the great raw land so sparsely tilled by the futile and occasional little farms, which seemed to have made only little grubbing patches in the wilderness, his heart went cold and leaden in him. He thought of the great barns of Pennsylvania, the ripe bending of golden grain, the plenty, the order, the clean thrift of the people. And he thought of how he had set out to get order and position for himself, and of the rioting confusion of his life, the blot and blur of years, and the red waste of his youth.

By God! he thought. I'm getting old! Why here?

The grisly parade of the spectre years trooped through his brain. Suddenly, he saw that his life had been channelled by a series of accidents: a mad Rebel singing of Armageddon, the sound of a bugle on the road, the mule-hoofs of the army, the silly white face of an angel in a dusty shop, a slut's pert wiggle of her hams as she passed by. He had reeled out of warmth and plenty into this barren land: as he stared out the window and saw the fallow unworked earth, the great raw lift of the Piedmont, the muddy red clay roads, and the slattern people gaping at the stations—a lean farmer gangling above his reins, a dawdling negro, a gap-toothed yokel, a hard sallow woman with a grimy baby—the strangeness of destiny stabbed him with fear. How came he here from the clean Dutch thrift of his youth into this vast lost earth of rickets?

The train rattled on over the reeking earth. Rain fell steadily. A brakeman came draftily into the dirty plush coach and emptied a scuttle of coal into the big stove at the end. High empty laughter shook a group of yokels sprawled on two turned seats. The bell tolled mournfully above the clacking wheels. There was a droning interminable wait at a junction-town near the foot-hills. Then the train moved on again across the vast rolling earth.

Dusk came. The huge bulk of the hills was foggily emergent. Small smoky lights went up in the hillside shacks. The train crawled dizzily across high trestles spanning ghostly hawthers of water. Far up, far down, plumed with wisps of smoke, toy cabins stuck to bank and gulch and hillside. The train toiled sinuously up among gouged red cuts with slow labor. As darkness came, Oliver descended at the little town of Old Stockade where the rails ended. The last great wall of the hills lay stark above him. As he left the dreary little station and stared into the greasy lamplight of a country store, Oliver felt that he was crawling, like a great beast, into the circle of those enormous hills to die.

The next morning he resumed his journey by coach. His destination was the little town of Altamont, twenty-four miles away beyond the rim of the great outer wall of the hills. As the horses strained slowly up the mountain road Oliver's spirit lifted a little. It was a gray-golden day in late October, bright and windy. There was a sharp bite and sparkle in the mountain air: the range soared above him, close, immense, clean, and barren. The trees rose gaunt and stark: they were almost leafless. The sky was full of windy white rags of cloud; a thick blade of mist washed slowly around the rampart of a mountain.

Below him a mountain stream foamed down its rocky bed, and he could see little dots of men laying the track that would coil across the hill toward Altamont. Then the sweating team lipped the gulch of the mountain, and, among soaring and lordly ranges that melted away in purple mist, they began the slow descent toward the high plateau on which the town of Altamont was built.

In the haunting eternity of these mountains. rimmed in their

enormous cup, he found sprawled out on its hundred hills and hollows a town of four thousand people.

There were new lands. His heart lifted.

This town of Altamont had been settled soon after the Revolutionary war. It had been a convenient stopping-off place for cattle-drovers and farmers in their swing eastward from Tennessee into South Carolina. And, for several decades before the Civil war, it had enjoyed the summer patronage of fashionable people from Charleston and the plantations of the hot South. When Oliver first came to it it had begun to get some reputation not only as a summer resort, but as a sanitarium for tuberculars. Several rich men from the North had established hunting lodges in the hills, and one of them had bought huge areas of mountain land and, with an army of imported architects, carpenters and masons, was planning the greatest country estate in America—something in limestone, with pitched slate roofs, and one hundred and eighty-three rooms. It was modelled on the chateau at Blois. There was also a vast new hotel, a sumptuous wooden barn, rambling comfortably upon the summit of a commanding hill.

But most of the population was still native, recruited from the hill and country people in the surrounding districts. They were Scotch-Irish mountaineers, rugged, provincial, intelligent, and industrious.

Oliver had about twelve hundred dollars saved from the wreckage of Cynthia's estate. During the winter he rented a little shack at one edge of the town's public square, acquired a small stock of marbles, and set up business. But he had little to do at first save to think of the prospect of his death. During the bitter and lonely winter, while he thought he was dying, the gaunt scarecrow Yankee that flapped muttering through the streets became an object of familiar gossip to the townspeople. All the people at his boarding-house knew that at night he walked his room with great caged strides, and that a long low moan that seemed wrung from his bowels quivered incessantly on his thin lips. But he spoke to no one about it.

And then the marvellous hill Spring came, green-golden, with brief spurting winds, the magic and fragrance of the blossoms,

warm gusts of balsam. The great wound in Oliver began to heal. His voice was heard in the land once more, there were purple flashes of the old rhetoric, the ghost of the old eagerness.

One day in April, as with fresh awakened senses, he stood before his shop, watching the flurry of life in the square, Oliver heard behind him the voice of a man who was passing. And that voice, flat, drawling, complacent, touched with sudden light a picture that had lain dead in him for twenty years.

"Hit's a comin'! Accordin' to my figgers hit's due June 11, 1886."

Oliver turned and saw retreating the burly persuasive figure of the prophet he had last seen vanishing down the dusty road that led to Gettysburg and Armageddon.

"Who is that?" he asked a man.

The man looked and grinned.

"That's Bacchus Pentland," he said. "He's quite a character. There are a lot of his folks around here."

Oliver wet his great thumb briefly. Then, with a thin grin, he said:

"Has Armageddon come yet?"

"He's expecting it any day now," said the man.

Then Oliver met Eliza. He lay one afternoon in Spring upon the smooth leather sofa of his little office, listening to the bright piping noises in the Square. A restoring peace brooded over his great extended body. He thought of the loamy black earth with its sudden young light of flowers, of the beaded chill of beer, and of the plumbtree's dropping blossoms. Then he heard the brisk heel-taps of a woman coming down among the marbles, and he got hastily to his feet. He was drawing on his well brushed coat of heavy black just as she entered.

"I tell you what," said Eliza, pursing her lips in reproachful banter, "I wish I was a man and had nothing to do but lie around all day on a good easy sofa."

"Good afternoon, madam," said Oliver with a flourishing bow. "Yes," he said, as a faint sly grin bent the corners of his thin mouth, "I reckon you've caught me taking my constitutional. As a matter of fact I very rarely lie down in the day-

time, but I've been in bad health for the last year now, and I'm not able to do the work I used to."

He was silent a moment; his face drooped in an expression of hangdog dejection. "Ah, Lord! I don't know what's to become of me!"

"Pshaw!" said Eliza briskly and contemptuously. "There's nothing wrong with you in my opinion. You're a big strapping fellow, in the prime of life. Half of it's only imagination. Most of the time we think we're sick it's all in the mind. I remember three years ago I was teaching school in Hominy Township when I was taken down with pneumonia. Nobody ever expected to see me come out of it alive but I got through it somehow; I well remember one day I was sitting down—as the fellow says, I reckon I was convalescin'; the reason I remember is Old Doctor Fletcher had just been and when he went out I saw him shake his head at my cousin Sally. 'Why Eliza, what on earth,' she said, just as soon as he had gone, 'he tells me you're spitting up blood every time you cough; you've got consumption as sure as you live.' 'Pshaw,' I said. I remember I laughed just as big as you please, determined to make a big joke of it all; I just thought to myself, I'm not going to give into it, I'll fool them all yet; 'I don't believe a word of it' (I said)," she nodded her head smartly at him, and pursed her lips, "'and besides, Sally' (I said) 'we've all got to go some time, and there's no use worrying about what's going to happen. It may come to-morrow, or it may come later, but it's bound to come to all in the end.'"

"Ah Lord!" said Oliver, shaking his head sadly. "You hit the nail on the head that time. A truer word was never spoken."

Merciful God! he thought, with an anguished inner grin. How long is this to keep up? But she's a pippin as sure as you're born. He looked appreciatively at her trim erect figure, noting her milky white skin, her black-brown eyes, with their quaint child's stare, and her jet black hair drawn back tightly from her high white forehead. She had a curious trick of pursing her lips reflectively before she spoke; she liked to take her time, and came to the point after interminable divagations down all the lane-ends of memory and overtone, feasting upon the golden pageant of all she had ever said, done, felt, thought, seen, or replied, with egocentric delight.

Then, while he looked, she ceased speaking abruptly, put her neat gloved hand to her chin, and stared off with a thoughtful pursed mouth.

"Well," she said after a moment, "if you're getting your health back and spend a good part of your time lying around you ought to have something to occupy your mind." She opened a leather portmanteau she was carrying and produced a visiting card and two fat volumes. "My name," she said portentously, with slow emphasis, "is Eliza Pentland, and I represent the Larkin Publishing Company."

She spoke the words proudly, with dignified gusto. Merciful God! A book-agent! thought Gant.

"We are offering," said Eliza, opening a huge yellow book with a fancy design of spears and flags and laurel wreaths, "a book of poems called *Gems of Verse for Hearth and Fireside* as well as *Larkin's Domestic Doctor and Book of Household Remedies*, giving directions for the cure and prevention of over five hundred diseases."

"Well," said Gant, with a faint grin, wetting his big thumb briefly, "I ought to find one that I've got out of that."

"Why, yes," said Eliza, nodding smartly, "as the fellow says, you can read poetry for the good of your soul and Larkin for the good of your body."

"I like poetry," said Gant, thumbing over the pages, and pausing with interest at the section marked *Songs of the Spur and Sabre*. "In my boyhood I could recite it by the hour."

He bought the books. Eliza packed her samples, and stood up looking sharply and curiously about the dusty little shop.

"Doing any business?" she said.

"Very little," said Oliver sadly. "Hardly enough to keep body and soul together. I'm a stranger in a strange land."

"Pshaw!" said Eliza cheerfully. "You ought to get out and meet more people. You need something to take your mind off yourself. If I were you, I'd pitch right in and take an interest in the town's progress. We've got everything here it takes to make a big town—scenery, climate, and natural resources, and we all ought to work together. If I had a few thousand dollars I know what I'd do,"—she winked smartly at him, and began to speak with a curiously masculine gesture of the hand—fore-

finger extended, fist loosely clenched. "Do you see this corner here—the one you're on? It'll double in value in the next few years. Now, here!" she gestured before her with the loose masculine gesture. "They're going to run a street through there some day as sure as you live. And when they do—" she pursed her lips reflectively, "that property is going to be worth money."

She continued to talk about property with a strange meditative hunger. The town seemed to be an enormous blueprint to her: her head was stuffed uncannily with figures and estimates—who owned a lot, who sold it, the sale-price, the real value, the future value, first and second mortgages, and so on. When she had finished, Oliver said with the emphasis of strong aversion, thinking of Sydney:

"I hope I never own another piece of property as long as I live—save a house to live in. It is nothing but a curse and a care, and the tax-collector gets it all in the end."

Eliza looked at him with a startled expression, as if he had uttered a damnable heresy.

"Why, say! That's no way to talk!" she said. "You want to lay something by for a rainy day, don't you?"

"I'm having my rainy day now," he said gloomily. "All the property I need is eight feet of earth to be buried in."

Then, talking more cheerfully, he walked with her to the door of the shop, and watched her as she marched primly away across the square, holding her skirts at the curbs with ladylike nicety. Then he turned back among his marbles again with a stirring in him of a joy he thought he had lost forever.

The Pentland family, of which Eliza was a member, was one of the strangest tribes that ever came out of the hills. It had no clear title to the name of Pentland: a Scotch-Englishman of that name, who was a mining engineer, the grandfather of the present head of the family, had come into the hills after the Revolution, looking for copper, and lived there for several years, begetting several children by one of the pioneer women. When he disappeared the woman took for herself and her children the name of Pentland.

The present chieftain of the tribe was Eliza's father, the



brother of the prophet Bacchus, Major Thomas Pentland. Another brother had been killed during the Seven Days. Major Pentland's military title was honestly if inconspicuously earned. While Bacchus, who never rose above the rank of Corporal, was blistering his hard hands at Shiloh, the Major, as commander of two companies of Home Volunteers, was guarding the stronghold of the native hills. This stronghold was never threatened until the closing days of the war, when the Volunteers, ambuscaded behind convenient trees and rocks, fired three volleys into a detachment of Sherman's stragglers, and quietly dispersed to the defense of their attendant wives and children.

The Pentland family was as old as any in the community, but it had always been poor, and had made few pretenses to gentility. By marriage, and by intermarriage among its own kinsmen, it could boast of some connection with the great, of some insanity, and a modicum of idiocy. But because of its obvious superiority, in intelligence and fibre, to most of the mountain people it held a position of solid respect among them.

The Pentlands bore a strong clan-marking. Like most rich personalities in strange families their powerful group-stamp became more impressive because of their differences. They had broad powerful noses, with fleshy deeply scalloped wings, sensual mouths, extraordinarily mixed of delicacy and coarseness, which in the process of thinking they convolved with astonishing flexibility, broad intelligent foreheads, and deep flat cheeks, a trifle hollowed. The men were generally ruddy of face, and their typical stature was meaty, strong, and of middling height, although it varied into gangling cadaverousness.

Major Thomas Pentland was the father of a numerous family of which Eliza was the only surviving girl. A younger sister had died a few years before of a disease which the family identified sorrowfully as "poor Jane's scrofula." There were six boys: Henry, the oldest, was now thirty, Will was twenty-six, Jim was twenty-two, and Thaddeus, Elmer, and Greeley were, in the order named, eighteen, fifteen, and eleven. Eliza was twenty-four.

The four oldest children, Henry, Will, Eliza, and Jim, had passed their childhood in the years following the war. The pov-