The View from Pompey's Head

A MAJOR AMERICAN NOVEL BY

Hamilton Basso

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Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Garden City, New York

Having been said so often, it must be said again—since this is a novel, none of its characters should be taken to represent any person, living or dead, and none of its incidents to be related in any way to an actual happening. It should be read as fiction throughout.

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

It was one of the grievances of the business element of Pompey's Head that the all-pullman train from New York to Miami reached its community at five forty-six in the morning.

Anson Page, sitting in a roomette in a car that some fanciful soul had named "The Marshes of Glynn," could understand why. Not only was the visitor compelled to rise before daylight and leave the train before the diner opened—a visitor whom the business element would naturally see as an important executive; a busy, hurried man who might well regard a poor night's sleep and an empty stomach as signs that Pompey's Head was not quite the up-and-coming place it ought to be—but along with his growling stomach and interrupted rest he would have an even larger objection. What was a man to do with himself at five forty-six in the morning?

Far removed from the commercial circles of Pompey's Head, one of the partners of the legal firm of Roberts, Guthrie, Barlowe & Paul, which represented most of the publishing houses in New York, Anson Page could afford to regard the matter lightly. Furthermore, he had not at all minded getting up before daylight, nor did he object to having to wait for his breakfast. Usually impatient for it, he was hardly aware that he had not eaten. He did not even have the slight headache that invariably bothered him whenever he had to undergo an early-morning fast. His, however, were a special set of circumstances. He could readily perceive why the more enterprising groups of Pompey's Head (the Chamber of Commerce; the Port Authority; the Industrial Committee) would prefer to have the best train that passed through town arrive at a more convenient hour; and it was no less difficult to understand why those who had to make the trip

regularly, faced with the prospect of not enough sleep, no breakfast, and sitting in a deserted hotel lobby until the day's work got under way, might in time come to regard the small Southern city of twenty-five thousand inhabitants as a most annoying port of call.

These, however, were only superficial musings; Anson Page's real attention was on more personal things. Lighting a cigarette, he looked out the window and watched the gray, indefinite rush of a sweep of heavily wooded country, broken by occasional stretches of murky swampland, that was just beginning to assume form and substance in the misty light of dawn. He tried to guess where he was—just past Spur Hill; just before Acorn?—but nothing in the moss-hung woods gave him a clue. Once, fifteen years ago, he would have been able to tell by the very shape and color of the land. Now it was as if this had never been part of the country that he had claimed when he was young. But it would be a nice day, he consoled himself; it always was when the mornings came with fog. The sun would burn through, the mist would vanish, and the rest of the day would be arched over by a blue, cloudless sky—the mere promise of such weather was enough to make him forget the dejection that had plagued him in New York, still cold and miserable the end of March.

Gradually the light grew brighter. A grove of pines flashed by, each trunk showing a deep gash below which hung a metal receptacle to catch the sap that dripped from the wound, and in a small clearing amid the trees a row of ramshackle cabins with rusty tin roofs stood sealed and shuttered against the morning's chill. Thin wisps of smoke floated above them, hanging blue and intact in the mist, the sagging chimneys looking as though they must finally yield to the stronger force of gravity at any moment and collapse into meaningless heaps of homemade rubble, and in one of the front yards a solitary rooster with a loose, flopped-over comb scratched aimlessly in the forlorn earth.

At last Anson knew where he was—the turpentine camp near Acorn, a one-street village sixteen miles north of Pompey's Head. No one happening to look in on him, seeing a slender, dark-haired man with serious brown eyes and a grave expression on his thin, well-modeled face, could possibly have surmised the high pitch to which all his sensibilities had been brought—certainly not the Negro porter who a few moments later came for his bags. The porter was fat and sleepy-looking. He wore a clean white jacket and his shoes were newly shined. Several folds of evenly divided flesh rolled down the back of his neck.

"About twenty minutes now, sir," he said with more than ordinary attentiveness, knowing how long Anson Page had been awake. "Old Pompey's the next stop."

"Yes," Anson replied. "I know."

It was true; he did know. He was a stranger, but not that much of a stranger. Pompey's Head was home. He was going home for the first time in fifteen years. He started to tell the porter about it, but he could not bring himself to believe that the porter would be interested. And yet he might be. A printed card slipped into a metal frame at one end of the car said that the porter's name was Thomas McElroy, and McElroy was an old Pompey's Head name—one of "The Twenty Families of Marlborough County." It could easily be that the porter came from Pompey's Head. After emancipation many of the Negro families kept the names of their former masters, and, besides, the porter had used the casual, familiar form of "Old Pompey"—that almost certainly identified him as a native. Anson was about to ask him if he was related to any of the McElroys who lived near Mulberry, the old Blackford place on the Cassava River, having suddenly remembered a cheerful, round-faced Negro boy named Tooker McElroy with whom he and Wyeth Blackford had used to hunt and fish, but then a muffled gong sounded at the far end of the car. The porter turned away with a tired look and paddled down the corridor. The faint hiss of the air-conditioning system overrode the low rumble of the wheels, and then, in answer to some muffled query, Anson heard him say, "No sir, we's not nearly to Savannah yet. We ain't in Georgia, even. We's still this side of Pompey's Head."

By the time the porter returned to carry off his bags, Anson had made up his mind not to ask him about the McElroys—the need for identification had passed. He told the porter to leave his briefcase, crushed out his cigarette, and looked through the window again. It was almost full light now and he could make out the separate features of the landscape. He noticed that the first redbud was in bloom, saw a big hawk fly from a tulip tree that grew near the right of way, and watched the brown waters of a narrow creek ripple lazily between low-lying banks that were marked on either side by soft, muddy places where generations of fishermen had taken up their stand. Ockeesawba Creek, his mind registered; no longer any need to wonder where he was. The whole face of the land came back to him, all of a piece and in all its detail. Stretching out his legs, which were cramped from his having sat too long in one position, he picked up the thread of

one memory after the other, restoring the pattern of a life that seemed almost to belong to another person, and, at the same time, mused upon the chain of circumstance that had conspired to bring him back to Pompey's Head after fifteen years on what could be regarded only as a singularly curious mission.

It had been one of those cold, wet March mornings in New York City that invariably caused Anson to feel gloomy and depressed. A gray rain was driving, a high wind was blowing, and it was so dark in the apartment that Meg had turned most of the lights on. Sitting ready for work in the dining alcove and glancing through the morning paper over a second cup of coffee, Anson told himself that it was some day to have to go out in, a perfect hell of a day. Down in Pompey's Head it would already be spring. The sun would be shining, the fruit trees would be in bloom, the weakfish would be running, and somebody would be getting ready to have an oyster roast on Cassava Beach.

Anson often told himself that you could not live in one place as long as he had without being deeply attached to it, without being pledged in a way that no one in his present circle of friends and acquaintances seemed able to understand; but at times like this, in the dismal heel of a New York winter, it was more than an attachment and a pledge—it was a pull and a drain on the heart. Not that he once imagined that he could ever go back to Pompey's Head to live. The act of divorcement had been too final; the blade of separation had cut too deep. What he thought about Pompey's Head, judiciously calculated over the years, had been written, properly disguised, into his book *The Shinto Tradition of the American South*, which even the New York *Times* and *The Nation* had gone out of their way to approve. His feeling for Pompey's Head, quite a different thing from what he thought, was purely a physical attraction. Meg once said that he felt about it the way a man feels who has found it necessary to give up a mistress he was still in love with, and he guessed it was true. But this particular mistress—he had come to regard her as a sunny-tempered, laughing girl who never wore a girdle and liked to go barefoot and who greatly resembled the flower-decked maiden in Botticelli's picture about spring—had been forsworn for fifteen years. He wanted no more of Pompey's Head. Mixed though his emotions were, he was content to be where he was.

The transition had not been easy. There used to be times in New York when he asked himself what he was doing in this sooty, amor-

phous town where even for $375 a month you couldn't rent a decent look at the sky, but he did so no longer. The answer was woven into every act of his everyday life. He was doing a job of work; he was supporting a family; he was at last earning enough money so that money was no longer too much of a problem; he had got out of Pompey's Head at a time when he could not bear to live there any longer, and here he was.

But feeling, the old pledge and the old attachment, would still intrude. Sometimes, often when he least expected it, he would be made aware of a kind of rootlessness, especially when he discovered that some New York landmark that he had come to depend upon, like the Collegiate Reformed Church of St. Nicholas on Fifth Avenue, was in the process of being torn down. He would then tell himself, along with thinking that New York was like a blacksnake that was always shedding its skin, that if he were back in Pompey's Head he could walk in the same shadow of the same trees and houses that his father and grandfather had walked in, but that was pure nostalgia, of course. Nobody had roots any more, as Meg said, and she could argue convincingly that any person who was really adjusted, able to stand on his own two feet, didn't need an inherited background to support him like a crutch.

All that, however, did nothing to alter the fact that it was one hell of a day. Anson was thinking that down in Pompey's Head a man would hardly bother to get out of bed on a day like this, or else take his own sweet time about it, when Meg came in from the kitchen. They were without help again and she had all the work to do. She wore a red wool housecoat over her nightgown and had on a pair of brocaded mules that tapped across the floor. She had done her face and fixed her short, wavy hair, and nobody would ever guess, looking at her, that she had roused a husband, made breakfast, argued a nine-year-old boy into eating his oatmeal and getting dressed for school, and taken care of the incredibly complicated needs of a five-year-old daughter.

Meg's ability to face up to the world the moment she got out of bed never ceased to amaze Anson. He himself met the day like a Chinese coolie who has paused with his bundles by the wayside for the night—each parcel had to be laboriously picked up and loaded, just so, and even then there were times when the headstrap chafed and pulled. Meg sat down at the table and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"I forgot to tell you," she said. "You'll have to take Patrick to

school this morning. Something's wrong with their station wagon."

Anson could feel his face beginning to look annoyed. "What, again? You would think that for almost what it costs to send a man to Yale that school would be able to afford something that ran occasionally. This is the fourth or fifth time in less than two weeks."

"I know," Meg said. "It's not the school's fault, though. The mechanic keeps telling them it's fixed and then it breaks down. Boojum says——"

Anson spread his hands. "Spare me what Boojum says, please. I can only take what Boojum says when I'm fully awake. Boojum and Beejum! When I went to school the principal was Mr. Roberts and his wife was Mrs. Roberts. I can just see a Boojum and a Beejum in Pompey's Head."

"Yes, darling. Everything was perfect in Pompey's Head."

It was one of Meg's useful advantages. By saying that everything was perfect in Pompey's Head, even though she knew he didn't think so, she could always cut him short. Besides, Meg didn't like the South. She had been there only once, when she and a maiden aunt went to Charleston after seeing a revival of *Porgy and Bess* and where they were made to feel cheated because there was no such place as Catfish Row, but that once was enough—it had been hot, and Charleston seemed like something preserved under glass, and why his thoughts kept returning to Pompey's Head was beyond her ability to understand.

"Isn't it a foul day?" she said.

"Don't sound so cheerful about it. This isn't a day. It's a conspiracy against the soul of man."

"Not at all," Meg said. "There's something exciting about it."

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, I don't know—the wind, the sound of the rain, the feeling that something is happening. It's exciting, that's all."

Anson started to say he knew a better excitement, fashioned of paper-whites and jonquils and the smell of tea-olives at night, but he wasn't sure that Meg knew what paper-whites and tea-olives were. He doubted that she ever had occasion to do any research about them, and, besides, he didn't want to be told again that everything was perfect in Pompey's Head. Most of the time Pompey's Head lay buried beneath the things that had happened during the past fifteen years, but on mornings like this it was different. Everything came back to him. He could see the squares that everyone was so proud of, not only for their oaks and magnolias and masses of azaleas but also

because they had been laid out at least a decade before the squares in Savannah, a circumstance that Savannah was reluctant to admit but which was a matter of historical record just the same, and he could see the narrow Georgian streets that ran off from the squares, each house built close to its neighbor and the streets filled with sunlight that fell through the trees and stippled the sidewalks with a pattern of leafy shadow that shook and trembled with every current of the wind. It probably wasn't the same any more, not after fifteen years, but on mornings like this there were no fifteen years. Anson could remember everything the way it was when he was living with his family on Alwyn Street. He suspected that it had some connection with his being eight months past his thirty-ninth birthday. It was a known fact that when you approached the foreground of middle age you tended to remember only the good things in the past, and even the bad things were not nearly so bad any more—the good things had happened to you; the bad things, somehow, had happened to a person you no longer were. It was this, Anson suspected, that enabled some men to write in their autobiographies of almost unbearable things. "Look!" the implication was. "See how we have come through!"

Another, stronger gust of wind rattled the windows, and there was another slap of rain.

"There's some more excitement for you," Anson said. "It gets more and more exciting by the minute. It's too bad you had to miss the Johnstown Flood."

"The way you harp about the weather," Meg answered. "What good does it do?"

"It does me good."

"Well, it doesn't me. Besides, the weatherman on the radio said it was going to clear up. It'll probably be a nice afternoon."

"I'll bet. It has all the makings of a nice afternoon."

Meg liked living in New York. No matter what the weather, it was better on the whole than the weather she had grown up in, and were it not that she felt that they ought to move to the suburbs for the sake of the children, she would be content to live in New York the rest of her life. Meg came from a little town in southwestern Indiana, a place called Hillsdale, and as far as she was concerned it could disappear without a trace. Not, so far as Anson could tell, that she had ever been particularly unhappy there, or that anything had gone wrong—her way of explaining it was that when she was seventeen she had made up her mind that she was damned if she was go-

ing to sit and rot in the Middle West. Even at seventeen Meg's determination had been something to reckon with. After she graduated from the Hillsdale High School, one of those extroverted prairie institutions given over to basketball, football, and 4-H clubs, she persuaded her parents to send her East to college, and five weeks after graduating from Bennington she was working as a researcher for one of the newsmagazines. Anson couldn't help contrasting her with some of the girls he had known before he came to New York—Kit Robbins, Dinah Blackford, Gaby Carpenter, Margie Rhett, and Joe Ann Williams. He doubted that Meg would approve of any of them.

"What's in the paper?" Meg asked. "Anything new?"

Anson tried to remember. "The Saint's in trouble again, the Dodgers look good in spring training, Vishinsky may be coming over for another visit, some of the members of the Supreme Court seem to be at outs with each other, and Harry Vaughan's got himself mixed up in some kind of trouble with iceboxes. Other than that——"

But Meg was seeing for herself. She sipped her coffee and picked up the copy of the *Herald Tribune* that Anson had brought in from the elevator landing, where it was deposited each morning. Her intelligent face with its short upper lip and slightly turned up nose took on a sober expression as she scanned the headlines. There was something about her that reminded Anson of the day he went to her office when she was working on the newsmagazine; they had a date for lunch and she was sitting at her desk reading a newspaper with her head tilted in much the same way. Anson thought she seemed hardly a year older. She looked as though she would be getting up at any moment to track down the beef production of Texas in 1902, or the number of Basques now resident in Idaho, or the name, age, and marital status of the sheriff of Como Bluff, Wyoming.

"That Vaughan!" she said. "You would think that Truman would have sense enough to fire him. Especially with the congressional elections coming up."

Meg had worked in that department of the newsmagazine called *The National Scene*. She was very good at her job. She had no trouble generating a new burst of excitement each week regardless of the stories she happened to draw, and had she stayed on instead of getting married she would probably have realized her ambition to become a staff writer. Becoming a staff writer, at one time, had meant a great deal to her.

"A scandal like this could easily cost the Democrats the election," she went on. "Anybody as shrewd as Truman ought to see that. He's