

THOMAS WOLFE

OF TIME
AND THE RIVER



*A Legend of Man's Hunger
in His Youth*

*"Who knoweth the spirit of man
that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast
that goeth downward to the earth?"*

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OF TIME
AND THE RIVER

TO
MAXWELL EVARTS PERKINS

A GREAT EDITOR AND A BRAVE AND HONEST MAN, WHO STUCK TO THE WRITER OF THIS BOOK THROUGH TIMES OF BITTER HOPELESSNESS AND DOUBT AND WOULD NOT LET HIM GIVE IN TO HIS OWN DESPAIR, A WORK TO BE KNOWN AS "OF TIME AND THE RIVER" IS DEDICATED WITH THE HOPE THAT ALL OF IT MAY BE IN SOME WAY WORTHY OF THE LOYAL DEVOTION AND THE PATIENT CARE WHICH A DAUNTLESS AND UNSHAKEN FRIEND HAS GIVEN TO EACH PART OF IT, AND WITHOUT WHICH NONE OF IT COULD HAVE BEEN WRITTEN

"Crito, my dear friend Crito, that, believe me, that is what I seem to hear, as the Corybants hear flutes in the air, and the sound of those words rings and echoes in my ears and I can listen to nothing else."

“Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn,
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn,
Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,
Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht,
Kennst du es wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Möcht' ich mit dir, O mein Geliebter, ziehn!

Kennst du das Haus, auf Säulen ruht sein Dach,
Es glänzt der Saal, es schimmert das Gemach,
Und Marmorbilder stehn und sehn mich an:
Was hat man dir, du armes Kind, getan?
Kennst du es wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Möcht' ich mit dir, O mein Beschützer, ziehn!

Kennst du den Berg und seinen Wolkensteg?
Das Maultier sucht im Nebel seinen Weg,
In Höhlen wohnt der Drachen alte Brut,
Es stürzt der Fels und über ihn die Flut:
Kennst du ihn wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Geht unser Weg; O Vater, lass uns ziehn!”

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BOOK I

ORESTES: FLIGHT BEFORE FURY

. . . of wandering forever and the earth again . . . of seed-time, bloom, and the mellow-dropping harvest. And of the big flowers, the rich flowers, the strange unknown flowers.

Where shall the weary rest? When shall the lonely of heart come home? What doors are open for the wanderer? And which of us shall find his father, know his face, and in what place, and in what time, and in what land? Where? Where the weary of heart can abide forever, where the weary of wandering can find peace, where the tumult, the fever, and the fret shall be forever stilled.

Who owns the earth? Did we want the earth that we should wander on it? Did we need the earth that we were never still upon it? Whoever needs the earth shall have the earth: he shall be still upon it, he shall rest within a little place, he shall dwell in one small room forever.

Did he feel the need of a thousand tongues that he sought thus through the moil and horror of a thousand furious streets? He shall need a tongue no longer, he shall need no tongue for silence and the earth: he shall speak no word through the rooted lips, the snake's cold eye will peer for him through sockets of the brain, there will be no cry out of the heart where wells the vine.

The tarantula is crawling through the rotted oak, the adder lisps against the breast, cups fall: but the earth will endure forever. The flower of love is living in the wilderness, and the elmroot threads the bones of buried lovers.

The dead tongue withers and the dead heart rots, blind mouths crawl tunnels through the buried flesh, but the earth will endure forever; hair grows like April on the buried breast and from the sockets of the brain the death flowers grow and will not perish.

O flower of love whose strong lips drink us downward into death, in all things far and fleeting, enchantress of our twenty thousand days, the brain will madden and the heart be twisted, broken by her kiss, but glory, glory, glory, she remains: Immortal love, alone and aching in the wilderness, we cried to you: You were not absent from our loneliness.

I

ABOUT fifteen years ago, at the end of the second decade of this century, four people were standing together on the platform of the railway station of a town in the hills of western Catawba. This little station, really just a suburban adjunct of the larger town which, behind the concealing barrier of a rising ground, swept away a mile or two to the west and north, had become in recent years the popular point of arrival and departure for travellers to and from the cities of the east, and now, in fact, accommodated a much larger traffic than did the central station of the town, which was situated two miles westward around the powerful bend of the rails. For this reason a considerable number of people were now assembled here, and from their words and gestures, a quietly suppressed excitement that somehow seemed to infuse the drowsy mid-October afternoon with an electric vitality, it was possible to feel the thrill and menace of the coming train.

An observer would have felt in the complexion of this gathering a somewhat mixed quality—a quality that was at once strange and familiar, alien and native, cosmopolitan and provincial. It was not the single native quality of the usual crowd that one saw on the station platforms of the typical Catawba town as the trains passed through. This crowd was more mixed and varied, and it had a strong coloring of worldly smartness, the element of fashionable sophistication that one sometimes finds in a place where a native and alien population have come together. And such an inference was here warranted: the town of Altamont a mile or so away was a well-known resort and the mixed gathering on the station platform was fairly representative of its population. But all of these people, both strange and native, had been drawn here by a common experience, an event which has always been of first interest in the lives of all Americans. This event is the coming of the train.

It would have been evident to an observer that of the four people who were standing together at one end of the platform three—the two women and the boy—were connected by the relationship of blood. A stranger would have known instantly that the boy and the young woman were brother and sister and that the woman was their mother. The relationship was somehow one of tone, texture, time, and energy,

and of the grain and temper of the spirit. The mother was a woman of small but strong and solid figure. Although she was near her sixtieth year, her hair was jet black and her face, full of energy and power, was almost as smooth and unlined as the face of a girl. Her hair was brushed back from a forehead which was high, white, full, and naked-looking, and which, together with the expression of her eyes, which were brown, and rather worn and weak, but constantly thoughtful, constantly reflective, gave her face the expression of straight grave innocence that children have, and also of strong native intelligence and integrity. Her skin was milk white, soft of texture, completely colorless save for the nose, which was red, broad and fleshy at the base, and curiously masculine.

A stranger seeing her for the first time would have known somehow that the woman was a member of a numerous family, and that her face had the tribal look. He would somehow have felt certain that the woman had brothers and that if he could see them, they would look like her. Yet, this masculine quality was not a quality of sex, for the woman, save for the broad manlike nose, was as thoroughly female as a woman could be. It was rather a quality of tribe and character—a tribe and character that was decisively masculine.

The final impression of the woman might have been this:—that her life was somehow above and beyond a moral judgment, that no matter what the course or chronicle of her life may have been, no matter what crimes of error, avarice, ignorance, or thoughtlessness might be charged to her, no matter what suffering or evil consequences may have resulted to other people through any act of hers, her life was somehow beyond these accidents of time, training, and occasion, and the woman was as guiltless as a child, a river, an avalanche, or any force of nature whatsoever.

The younger of the two women was about thirty years old. She was a big woman, nearly six feet tall, large, and loose of bone and limb, almost gaunt. Both women were evidently creatures of tremendous energy, but where the mother suggested a constant, calm, and almost tireless force, the daughter was plainly one of those big, impulsive creatures of the earth who possess a terrific but undisciplined vitality, which they are ready to expend with a whole-souled and almost frenzied prodigality on any person, enterprise, or object which appeals to their grand affections.

This difference between the two women was also reflected in their faces. The face of the mother, for all its amazing flexibility, the startled animal-like intentness with which her glance darted from one object to

another, and the mobility of her powerful and delicate mouth, which she pursed and convolved with astonishing flexibility in such a way as to show the constant reflective effort of her mind, was nevertheless the face of a woman whose spirit had an almost elemental quality of patience, fortitude and calm.

The face of the younger woman was large, high-boned, and generous and already marked by the frenzy and unrest of her own life. At moments it bore legibly and terribly the tortured stain of hysteria, of nerves stretched to the breaking point, of the furious impatience, unrest and dissonance of her own tormented spirit, and of impending exhaustion and collapse for her overwrought vitality. Yet, in an instant, this gaunt, strained, tortured, and almost hysterical face could be transformed by an expression of serenity, wisdom, and repose that would work unbelievably a miracle of calm and radiant beauty on the nervous, gaunt, and tortured features.

Now, each in her own way, the two women were surveying the other people on the platform and the new arrivals with a ravenous and absorptive interest, bestowing on each a wealth of information, comment, and speculation which suggested an encyclopædic knowledge of the history of every one in the community.

"—Why, yes, child," the mother was saying impatiently, as she turned her quick glance from a group of people who at the moment were the subject of discussion—"that's what I'm telling you!—Don't I know? . . . Didn't I grow up with all those people? . . . Wasn't Emma Smathers one of my girlhood friends? . . . That boy's not this woman's child at all. He's Emma Smathers' child by that first marriage."

"Well, that's news to me," the younger woman answered. "That's certainly news to me. I never knew Steve Randolph had been married more than once. I'd always thought that all that bunch were Mrs. Randolph's children."

"Why, of course not!" the mother cried impatiently. "She never had any of them except Lucille. All the rest of them were Emma's children. Steve Randolph was a man of forty-five when he married her. He'd been a widower for years—poor Emma died in childbirth when Bernice was born—nobody ever thought he'd marry again and nobody ever expected this woman to have any children of her own for she was almost as old as he was—why, yes!—hadn't she been married before, a widow, you know, when she met him, came here after her first husband's death from some place way out West—oh, Wyoming, or Nevada or Idaho, one of those States, you know—and had never had chick nor child, as the say-

ing goes—till she married Steve. And that woman was every day of forty-four years old when Lucille was born.”

“Uh-huh! . . . Ah-hah!” the younger woman muttered absently, in a tone of rapt and fascinated interest, as she looked distantly at the people in the other group, and reflectively stroked her large chin with a big, bony hand. “So Lucille, then, is really John’s half-sister?”

“Why, of course!” the mother cried. “I thought every one knew that. Lucille’s the only one that this woman can lay claim to. The rest of them were Emma’s.”

“—Well, that’s certainly news to me,” the younger woman said slowly as before. “It’s the first I ever heard of it. . . . And you say she was forty-four when Lucille was born?”

“Now, she was all of *that*,” the mother said. “I know. And she may have been even older.”

“Well,” the younger woman said, and now she turned to her silent husband, Barton, with a hoarse snigger, “it just goes to show that while there’s life there’s hope, doesn’t it? So cheer up, honey,” she said to him, “we may have a chance yet.” But despite her air of rough banter her clear eyes for a moment had a look of deep pain and sadness in them.

“Chance!” the mother cried strongly, with a little scornful pucker of the lips—“why, of course there is! If I was your age again I’d have a dozen—and never think a thing of it.” For a moment she was silent, pursing her reflective lips. Suddenly a faint sly smile began to flicker at the edges of her lips, and turning to the boy, she addressed him with an air of sly and bantering mystery:

“Now, boy,” she said—“there’s lots of things that you don’t know . . . you always thought you were the last—the youngest—didn’t you?”

“Well, wasn’t I?” he said.

“H’m!” she said with a little scornful smile and an air of great mystery—“There’s lots that I could tell you—”

“Oh, my God!” he groaned, turning towards his sister with an imploring face. “More mysteries! . . . The next thing I’ll find that there were five sets of triplets after I was born— Well, come on, Mama,” he cried impatiently. “Don’t hint around all day about it. . . . What’s the secret now—how many were there?”

“H’m!” she said with a little bantering, scornful, and significant smile.

“O Lord!” he groaned again— “Did she ever tell you what it was?” Again he turned imploringly to his sister.

She snickered hoarsely, a strange high-husky and derisive falsetto laugh, at the same time prodding him stiffly in the ribs with her big fingers:

"Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi," she laughed. "More spooky business, hey? You don't know the half of it. She'll be telling you next you were only the fourteenth."

"H'm!" the older woman said, with a little scornful smile of her pursed lips. "Now I could tell him more than that! The fourteenth! Pshaw!" she said contemptuously—"I could tell him—"

"O God!" he groaned miserably. "I knew it! . . . I don't want to hear it."

"K, k, k, k, k," the younger woman snickered derisively, prodding him in the ribs again.

"No, sir," the older woman went on strongly—"and that's not all either!— Now, boy, I want to tell you something that you didn't know," and as she spoke she turned the strange and worn stare of her serious brown eyes on him, and levelled a half-clasped hand, fingers pointing, a gesture loose, casual, and instinctive and powerful as a man's.— "There's a lot I could tell you that you never heard. Long years after you were born, child—why, at the time I took you children to the Saint Louis Fair—" here her face grew stern and sad, she pursed her lips strongly and shook her head with a short convulsive movement—"oh, when I think of it—to think what I went through—oh, awful, awful, you know," she whispered ominously.

"Now, Mama, for God's sake, I don't want to hear it!" he fairly shouted, beside himself with exasperation and foreboding. "God-damn it, can we have no peace—even when I go away!" he cried bitterly and illogically. "Always these damned gloomy hints and revelations—this Pentland spooky stuff," he yelled—"this damned I-could-if-I-wanted-to-tell-you air of mystery, horror, and damnation!" he shouted incoherently. "Who cares? What does it matter?" he cried, adding desperately, "I don't want to hear about it— No one cares."

"Why, child, now, I was only saying—" she began hastily and diplomatically.

"All right, all right, all right," he muttered. "I don't care—"

"But, as I say, now," she resumed.

"I don't care!" he shouted. "Peace, peace, peace, peace, peace," he muttered in a crazy tone as he turned to his sister. "A moment's peace for all of us before we die. A moment of peace, peace, peace."

"Why, boy, I'll vow," the mother said in a vexed tone, fixing her reproving glance on him, "what on earth's come over you? You act like a regular crazy man. I'll vow you do."

"A moment's peace!" he muttered again, thrusting one hand wildly

through his hair. "I beg and beseech you for a moment's peace before we perish!"

"K, k, k, k, k," the younger woman snickered derisively, as she poked him stiffly in the ribs—"There's no peace for the weary. It's like that river that goes on forever," she said with a faint loose curving of lewd humor around the edges of her generous big mouth—"Now you see, don't you?" she said, looking at him with this lewd and challenging look. "You see what it's like now, don't you? . . . *You're* the lucky one! *You* got away! You're smart enough to go way off somewhere to college—to Boston—Harvard—anywhere—but *you're* away from it. You get it for a short time when you come home. How do you think *I* stand it?" she said challengingly. "I have to hear it *all* the time. . . . Oh, *all* the time, and *all* the time, and *all* the time!" she said with a kind of weary desperation. "If they'd only leave me *alone* for five minutes some time I think I'd be able to pull myself together, but it's this way *all* the time and *all* the time and *all* the time. You see, don't you?"

But now, having finished, in a tone of hoarse and panting exasperation, her frenzied protest, she relapsed immediately into a state of marked, weary, and dejected resignation.

"Well, I know, I know," she said in a weary and indifferent voice. ". . . Forget about it. . . . Talking does no good. . . . Just try to make the best of it the little time you're here. . . . I used to think something could be done about it . . . but I know different now," she muttered, although she would have been unable to explain the logical meaning of these incoherent and disjointed phrases.

"Hah? . . . What say?" the mother now cried sharply, darting her glances from one to another with the quick, startled, curiously puzzled intentness of an animal or a bird. "What say?" she cried sharply again, as no one answered. "I thought——"

But fortunately, at this moment, this strange and disturbing flash in which had been revealed the blind and tangled purposes, the powerful and obscure impulses, the tormented nerves, the whole tragic perplexity of soul which was of the very fabric of their lives, was interrupted by a commotion in one of the groups upon the platform, and by a great guffaw of laughter which instantly roused these three people from this painful and perplexing scene, and directed their startled attention to the place from which the laughter came.

And now again they heard the great guffaw—a solid "Haw! Haw! Haw!" which was full of such an infectious exuberance of animal good-nature that other people on the platform began to smile instinctively, and to look affectionately towards the owner of the laugh.

Already, at the sound of the laugh, the young woman had forgotten the weary and dejected resignation of the moment before, and with an absent and yet eager look of curiosity in her eyes, she was staring towards the group from which the laugh had come, and herself now laughing absently, she was stroking her big chin in a gesture of meditative curiosity, saying:

"Hah! Hah! Hah! . . . That's George Pentland. . . . You can tell him anywhere by his laugh."

"Why, yes," the mother was saying briskly, with satisfaction. "That's George all right. I'd know him in the dark the minute that I heard that laugh.—And say, what about it? He's always had it—why, ever since he was a kid-boy—and was going around with Steve. . . . Oh, he'd come right out with it anywhere, you know, in Sunday school, church, or while the preacher was sayin' prayers before collection—that big, loud laugh, you know, that you could hear, from here to yonder, as the sayin' goes. . . . Now I don't know where it comes from—none of the others ever had it in our family; now we all liked to laugh well enough, but I never heard no such laugh as that from any of 'em—there's one thing sure, Will Pentland never laughed like that in his life— Oh, Pett, you know! Pett!"—a scornful and somewhat malicious look appeared on the woman's face as she referred to her brother's wife in that whining and affected tone with which women imitate the speech of other women whom they do not like—"Pett got so mad at him one time when he laughed right out in church that she was goin' to take the child right home an' whip him.—Told me, says to me, you know—'Oh, I could wring his neck! He'll disgrace us all,' she says, 'unless I cure him of it,' says, 'He burst right out in that great roar of his while Doctor Baines was sayin' his prayers this morning until you couldn't hear a word the preacher said.' Said, 'I was so mortified to think he could do a thing like that that I'd a-beat the blood right out of him if I'd had my buggy whip,' says, 'I don't know where it comes from'—oh, sneerin'-like, you know," the woman said, imitating the other woman's voice with a sneering and viperous dislike—"I don't know where it comes from unless it's some of that common Pentland blood comin' out in him"—"Now you listen to me," I says; oh, I looked her in the eye, you know"—here the woman looked at her daughter with the straight steady stare of her worn brown eyes, illustrating her speech with the loose and powerful gesture of the half-clasped finger-pointing hand—"you listen to me. I don't know where that child gets his laugh," I says, 'but you can bet your bottom dollar that he never got it from his father—or any other Pentland that I ever heard of—for none of them ever laughed that way—Will, or Jim, or

Sam, or George, or Ed, or Father, or even Uncle Bacchus,' I said—'no, nor old Bill Pentland either, who was that child's great-grandfather—for I've seen an' heard 'em all,' I says. 'And as for this common Pentland blood you speak of, Pett'—oh, I guess I talked to her pretty straight, you know," she said with a little bitter smile, and the short, powerful, and convulsive tremor of her strong pursed lips—"as for that common Pentland blood you speak of, Pett,' I says, 'I never heard of that either—for we stood high in the community' I says, 'and we all felt that Will was lowerin' himself when he married a Creasman!'"

"Oh, you didn't say that, Mama, surely not," the young woman said with a hoarse, protesting, and yet abstracted laugh, continuing to survey the people on the platform with a bemused and meditative curiosity, and stroking her big chin thoughtfully as she looked at them, pausing from time to time to grin in a comical and rather formal manner, bow graciously, and murmur:

"How-do-you-do? ah-hah? How-do-you-do, Mrs. Willis?"

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" Again the great laugh of empty animal good nature burst out across the station platform, and this time George Pentland turned from the group of which he was a member and looked vacantly around him, his teeth bared with savage joy, as, with two brown fingers of his strong left hand, he dug vigorously into the muscular surface of his hard thigh. It was an animal reflex, instinctive and unconscious, habitual to him in moments of strong mirth.

He was a powerful and handsome young man in his early thirties, with coal-black hair, a strong thick neck, powerful shoulders, and the bull vitality of the athlete. He had a red, sensual, curiously animal and passionate face, and when he laughed his great guffaw, his red lips were bared over two rows of teeth that were white and regular and solid as ivory.

—But now, the paroxysm of that savage and mindless laughter having left him, George Pentland had suddenly espied the mother and her children, waved to them in genial greeting, and excusing himself from his companions—a group of young men and women who wore the sporting look and costume of "the country club crowd"—he was walking towards his kinsmen at an indolent swinging stride, pausing to acknowledge heartily the greetings of people on every side, with whom he was obviously a great favorite.

As he approached, he bared his strong white teeth again in greeting, and in a drawling, rich-fibred voice, which had unmistakably the Pentland quality of sensual fulness, humor, and assurance, and a subtle but gloating note of pleased self-satisfaction, he said:

"Hello, Aunt Eliza, how are you? Hello, Helen—how are you, Hugh?" he said in his high, somewhat accusing, but very strong and masculine voice, putting his big hand in an easy affectionate way on Barton's arm. "Where the hell you been keepin' yourself anyway?" he said accusingly. "Why don't some of you folks come over to see us sometime? Ella was askin' about you all the other day—wanted to know why Helen didn't come around more often."

"Well, George, I tell you how it is," the young woman said with an air of great sincerity and earnestness. "Hugh and I have intended to come over a hundred times, but life has been just one damned thing after another all summer long. If I could only have a moment's peace—if I could only get away by myself for a moment—if *they* would only leave me *alone* for an hour at a time, I think I could get myself together again—do you know what I mean, George?" she said hoarsely and eagerly, trying to enlist him in her sympathetic confidence—"If they'd only do something for *themselves* once in a while—but they *all* come to me when anything goes wrong—they never let me have a moment's peace—until at times I think I'm going crazy—I get *queer*—funny, you know," she said vaguely and incoherently. "I don't know whether something happened Tuesday or last week or if I just imagined it." And for a moment her big gaunt face had the dull strained look of hysteria.

"The strain on her has been very great this summer," said Barton in a deep and grave tone. "It's—it's," he paused carefully, deeply, searching for a word, and looked down as he flicked an ash from his long cigar, "it's—been too much for her. Everything's on her shoulders," he concluded in his deep grave voice.

"My God, George, what is it?" she said quietly and simply, in the tone of one begging for enlightenment. "Is it going to be this way all our lives? Is there never going to be any peace or happiness for us? Does it always have to be this way? Now I want to ask you—is there nothing in the world but trouble?"

"Trouble!" he said derisively. "Why, I've had more trouble than any one of you ever heard of. . . . I've had enough to kill a dozen people . . . but when I saw it wasn't goin' to kill me, I quit worryin'. . . . So you do the same thing," he advised heartily. "Hell, don't *worry*, Helen! . . . It never got you anywhere. . . . You'll be all right," he said. "You got nothin' to worry over. You don't know what trouble is."

"Oh, I'd be all right, George—I think I could stand anything—all the rest of it—if it wasn't for Papa. . . . I'm almost crazy from worrying about him this summer. There were three times there when I knew he was gone. . . . And I honestly believe I pulled him back each time by