

Thomas Wolfe

YOU CAN'T
GO HOME
AGAIN



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YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

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EIGHTH EDITION

G-T

You Can't Go Home Again

By the Same Author

*

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL
OF TIME AND THE RIVER
FROM DEATH TO MORNING
THE STORY OF A NOVEL
THE FACE OF A NATION
THE WEB AND THE ROCK

*

There came to him an image of man's whole life upon the earth. It seemed to him that all man's life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man's grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory, came from the brevity and smallness of this flame. He knew his life was little and would be extinguished, and that only darkness was immense and everlasting. And he knew that he would die with defiance on his lips, and that the shout of his denial would ring with the last pulsing of his heart into the maw of all-engulfing night.

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BOOK I

THE NATIVE'S RETURN

Chapter I

The Drunken Beggar on Horseback

IT WAS THE HOUR OF TWILIGHT ON A SOFT SPRING DAY TOWARD THE END OF April in the year of Our Lord 1929, and George Webber leaned his elbows on the sill of his back window and looked out at what he could see of New York. His eye took in the towering mass of the new hospital at the end of the block, its upper floors set back in terraces, the soaring walls salmon colored in the evening light. This side of the hospital, and directly opposite, was the lower structure of the annex, where the nurses and the waitresses lived. In the rest of the block half a dozen old brick houses, squeezed together in a solid row, leaned wearily against each other and showed their backsides to him.

The air was strangely quiet. All the noises of the city were muted here into a distant hum, so unceasing that it seemed to belong to silence. Suddenly, through the open windows at the front of the house came the raucous splutter of a truck starting up at the loading platform of the warehouse across the street. The heavy motor warmed up with a full-throated roar, then there was a grinding clash of gears, and George felt the old house tremble under him as the truck swung out into the street and thundered off. The noise receded, grew fainter, then faded into the general hum, and all was quiet as before.

As George leaned looking out of his back window a nameless happiness welled within him and he shouted over to the waitresses in the hospital annex, who were ironing out as usual their two pairs of drawers and their flimsy little dresses. He heard, as from a great dis-

tance, the faint shouts of children playing in the streets, and, near at hand, the low voices of the people in the houses. He watched the cool, steep shadows, and saw how the evening light was moving in the little squares of yards, each of which had in it something intimate, familiar, and revealing—a patch of earth in which a pretty woman had been setting out flowers, working earnestly for hours and wearing a big straw hat and canvas gloves; a little plot of new-sown grass, solemnly watered every evening by a man with a square red face and a bald head; a little shed or playhouse or workshop for some business man's spare-time hobby; or a gay-painted table, some easy lounging chairs, and a huge bright-striped garden parasol to cover it, and a good-looking girl who had been sitting there all afternoon reading, with a coat thrown over her shoulders and a tall drink at her side.

Through some enchantment of the quiet and the westering light and the smell of April in the air, it seemed to George that he knew these people all around him. He loved this old house on Twelfth Street, its red brick walls, its rooms of noble height and spaciousness, its old dark woods and floors that creaked; and in the magic of the moment it seemed to be enriched and given a profound and lonely dignity by all the human beings it had sheltered in its ninety years. The house became like a living presence. Every object seemed to have an animate vitality of its own—walls, rooms, chairs, tables, even a half-wet bath towel hanging from the shower ring above the tub, a coat thrown down upon a chair, and his papers, manuscripts, and books scattered about the room in wild confusion.

The simple joy he felt at being once more a part of such familiar things also contained an element of strangeness and unreality. With a sharp stab of wonder he reminded himself, as he had done a hundred times in the last few weeks, that he had really come home again—home to America, home to Manhattan's swarming rock, and home again to love; and his happiness was faintly edged with guilt when he re-

remembered that less than a year before he had gone abroad in anger and despair, seeking to escape what now he had returned to.

In his bitter resolution of that spring a year ago, he had wanted most of all to get away from the woman he loved. Esther Jack was much older than he, married and living with her husband and grown daughter. But she had given George her love, and given it so deeply, so exclusively, that he had come to feel himself caught as in a trap. It was from that that he had wanted to escape—that and the shameful memory of their savage quarrels, and a growing madness in himself which had increased in violence as she had tried to hold him. So he had finally left her and fled to Europe. He had gone away to forget her, only to find that he could not; he had done nothing but think of her all the time. The memory of her rosy, jolly face, her essential goodness, her sure and certain talent, and all the hours that they had spent together returned to torture him with new desire and longing for her.

Thus, fleeing from a love that still pursued him, he had become a wanderer in strange countries. He had traveled through England, France, and Germany, had seen countless new sights and people, and—cursing, whoring, drinking, brawling his way across the continent—had had his head bashed in, some teeth knocked out, and his nose broken in a beer-hall fight. And then, in the solitude of convalescence in a Munich hospital, lying in bed upon his back with his ruined face turned upward toward the ceiling, he had had nothing else to do but think. There, at last, he had learned a little sense. There his madness had gone out of him, and for the first time in many years he had felt at peace within himself.

For he had learned some of the things that every man must find out for himself, and he had found out about them as one has to find out—through error and through trial, through fantasy and illusion, through falsehood and his own damn foolishness, through being mistaken and

wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused. As he lay there in the hospital he had gone back over his life, and, bit by bit, had extracted from it some of the hard lessons of experience. Each thing he learned was so simple and obvious, once he grasped it, that he wondered why he had not always known it. All together, they wove into a kind of leading thread, trailing backward through his past, and out into the future. And he thought that now, perhaps, he could begin to shape his life to mastery, for he felt a sense of new direction deep within him, but whither it would take him he could not say.

And what had he learned? A philosopher would not think it much, perhaps, yet in a simple human way it was a good deal. Just by living, by making the thousand little daily choices that his whole complex of heredity, environment, conscious thought, and deep emotion had driven him to make, and by taking the consequences, he had learned that he could not eat his cake and have it, too. He had learned that in spite of his strange body, so much off scale that it had often made him think himself a creature set apart, he was still the son and brother of all men living. He had learned that he could not devour the earth, that he must know and accept his limitations. He realized that much of his torment of the years past had been self-inflicted, and an inevitable part of growing up. And, most important of all for one who had taken so long to grow up, he thought he had learned not to be the slave of his emotions.

Most of the trouble he had brought upon himself, he saw, had come from leaping down the throat of things. Very well, he would look before he leaped hereafter. The trick was to get his reason and his emotions pulling together in double harness, instead of letting them fly off in opposite directions, tearing him apart between them. He would try to give his head command and see what happened: then if head said, "Leap!"—he'd leap with all his heart.

And that was where Esther came in, for he had really not meant to

come back to her. His head had told him it was better to let their affair end as it had ended. But no sooner had he arrived in New York than his heart told him to call her up—and he had done it. Then they had met again, and after that things followed their own course.

So here he was, back with Esther—the one thing he had once been sure would never happen. Yes, and very happy to be back. That was the queerest part of it. It seemed, perversely, that he ought to be unhappy to be doing what his reason had told him not to do. But he was not. And that was why, as he leaned there musing on his window sill while the last light faded and the April night came on, a subtle worm was gnawing at his conscience and he wondered darkly at how great a lag there was between his thinking and his actions.

He was twenty-eight years old now, and wise enough to know that there are sometimes reasons of which the reason knows nothing, and that the emotional pattern of one's life, formed and set by years of living, is not to be discarded quite as easily as one may throw away a battered hat or worn-out shoe. Well, he was not the first man to be caught on the horns of this dilemma. Had not even the philosophers themselves been similarly caught? Yes—and then written sage words about it:

“A foolish consistency,” Emerson had said, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

And great Goethe, accepting the inevitable truth that human growth does not proceed in a straight line to its goal, had compared the development and progress of mankind to the reelings of a drunken beggar on horseback.

What was important, perhaps, was not that the beggar was drunk and reeling, but that he was mounted on his horse, and, however unsteadily, was *going somewhere*.

This thought was comforting to George, and he pondered it for some time, yet it did not altogether remove the edge of guilt that faintly tinged his contentment. There was still a possible flaw in the argument:

His inconsistency in coming back to Esther—was it wise or foolish?
... Must the beggar on horseback forever reel?

Esther awoke as quick and sudden as a bird. She lay upon her back and stared up at the ceiling straight and wide. This was her body and her flesh, she was alive and ready in a moment.

She thought at once of George. Their reunion had been a joyous re-discovery of love, and all things were made new again. They had taken up the broken fragments of their life and joined them together with all the intensity and beauty that they had known in the best days before he went away. The madness that had nearly wrecked them both had now gone out of him entirely. He was still full of his unpredictable moods and fancies, but she had not seen a trace of the old black fury that used to make him lash about and beat his knuckles bloody against the wall. Since he returned he had seemed quieter, surer, in better control of himself, and in everything he did he acted as if he wanted to show her that he loved her. She had never known such perfect happiness. Life was good.

Outside, on Park Avenue, the people had begun to move along the sidewalks once more, the streets of the city began to fill and thicken. Upon the table by her bed the little clock ticked eagerly its pulse of time as if it hurried forward forever like a child toward some imagined joy, and a clock struck slowly in the house with a measured, solemn chime. The morning sun steeped each object in her room with casual light, and in her heart she said, "It is now."

Nora brought coffee and hot rolls, and Esther read the paper. She read the gossip of the theatre, and she read the names of the cast that had been engaged for the new German play that the Community Guild was going to do in the fall, and she read that "Miss Esther Jack has been engaged to design the show." She laughed because they called her "Miss," and because she could see the horrified look on *his*

face when he read it, and because she remembered his expression when the little tailor thought she was his wife, and because it gave her so much pleasure to see her name in the paper— “Miss Esther Jack, whose work has won her recognition as one of the foremost modern designers.”

She was feeling gay and happy and pleased with herself, so she put the paper in her bag, together with some other clippings she had saved, and took them with her when she went downtown to Twelfth Street for her daily visit to George. She handed them to him, and sat opposite to watch his face as he read them. She remembered all the things they had written about her work: •

“ . . . subtle, searching, and hushed, with a wry and rueful humor of its own. . . .” [ru=ful] adj. 滑稽 (喜) 的, 悲 (哀) 的, 可 (可) 怜 (怜) 的.

“ . . . made these old eyes shine by its deft, sure touch of whimsy as nothing else in this prodigal season of dramatic husks has done. . . .”

“ . . . the gay insouciance of her unmannered settings, touched with those qualities which we have come to expect in all her ardent services to that sometimes too ungrateful jade, the drama. . . .”

“ . . . the excellent fooling that is implicit in these droll sets, elvishly sly, mocking, and, need we add or make apology for adding, expert? . . .”

She could hardly keep from laughing at the scornful twist of his mouth and the mocking tone of his comment as he bit off the phrases.

“‘Elvishly sly!’ Now isn’t that too God-damned delightful!” he said with mincing precision. “‘Made these old eyes shine!’ Why, the quaint little bastard! . . . ‘That sometimes too ungrateful jade!’ Oh, deary me, now! . . . ‘And need we add—!’ I am swooning, sweetheart: pass the garlic!” = elfish adj. 狡猾 (狡) 的, 奸 (奸) 诈 (诈) 的 = 狡 (狡) 诈 (诈) 的.

He threw the papers on the floor with an air of disgust and turned to her with a look of mock sternness that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“Well,” he said, “do I get fed, or must I starve here while you wallow in this bilge?”

She could control herself no longer and shrieked with glee. "I didn't do it!" she gasped. "I didn't write it! I can't help it if they write like that! Isn't it awful?"

"Yes, and you hate it, don't you?" he said. "You lap it up! You are sitting there licking your lips over it now, gloating on it, and on my hunger! Don't you know, woman, that I haven't had a bite to eat all day? Do I get fed, or not? Will you put your deft whimsey in a steak?"

"Yes," she said. "Would you like a steak?"

"Will you make these old eyes shine with a chop and a delicate dressing of young onions?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

He came over and put his arms about her, his eyes searching hers in a look of love and hunger. "Will you make me one of your sauces that is subtle, searching, and hushed?"

"Yes," she said. "Whatever you like, I will make it for you."

"Why will you make it for me?" he asked.

It was like a ritual that both of them knew, and they fastened upon each word and answer because they were so eager to hear it from each other.

"Because I love you. Because I want to feed you and to love you."

"Will it be good?" he said.

"It will be so good that there will be no words to tell its goodness," she said. "It will be good because I am so good and beautiful, and because I can do everything better than any other woman you will ever know, and because I love you with all my heart and soul, and want to be a part of you."

"Will this great love get into the food you cook for me?"

"It will be in every morsel that you eat. It will feed your hunger as you've never been fed before. It will be like a living miracle, and will make you better and richer as long as you live. You will never forget it. It will be a glory and a triumph."

"Then this will be such food as no one ever ate before," he said.

"Yes," she said. "It will be."