



The Alcoholic Veteran with the Washboard Cranium, Henry Miller

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IN TULSA not long ago I saw a shorty short movie called “The Happiest Man on Earth.” It was in the O. Henry style but the implications were devastating.

How a picture like that could be shown in the heart of the oil fields is beyond my comprehension.

At any rate it reminded me of an actual human figure whom I encountered some weeks previously in New Orleans. He too was trying to pretend that he was the happiest mortal alive.

It was about midnight and my friend Rattner and I were returning to our hotel after a jaunt through the French Quarter.

As we were passing the St. Charles Hotel a man without a hat or overcoat fell into step with us and began talking about the eyeglasses he had just lost at the bar.

“It’s hell to be without your glasses,” he said, “especially when you’re just getting over a jag. I envy you fellows. Some fool drunk in there just knocked mine off and stepped on them. Just sent a telegram to my oculist in Denver—suppose I’ll have to wait a few days before they arrive.

I’m just getting over one hell of a binge: it must have lasted a week or more, I don’t know what day it is or what’s happened in the world since I fell off the wagon. I just stepped out to get a breath of air—and some food. I never eat when I’m on a bat—the alcohol keeps me going.

There's nothing to do about it, of course; I'm a confirmed alcoholic. Incurable. I know all about the subject—studied medicine before I took up law. I've tried all the cures, read all the theories. . . .

Why look here—” and he reached into his breast pocket and extricated a mass of papers along with a thick wallet which fell to the ground—“look at this, here's an article on the subject I wrote myself. Funny, what? It was just published recently in. . .” (he mentioned a well-known publication with a huge circulation).

I stooped down to pick up the wallet and the calling cards which had fluttered out and fallen into the gutter. He was holding the loose bundle of letters and documents in one hand and gesticulating eloquently with the other.

He seemed to be utterly unconcerned about losing any of his papers or even about the contents of the wallet.

He was raving about the ignorance and stupidity of the medical profession. They were a bunch of quacks; they were hijackers; they were criminal-minded. And so on.

It was cold and rainy and we, who were bundled up in overcoats, were urging him to get moving.

“Oh, don't worry about that,” he said, with a good-natured grin, “I never catch cold. I must have left my hat and coat in the bar. The air feels good,” and he threw his coat open wide as if to let the mean, penetrating night wind percolate through the thin covering in which he was wrapped.

He ran his fingers through his shock of curly blond hair and wiped the corners of his mouth with a soiled handkerchief. He was a man of good stature with a rather weather-beaten face, a man who evidently lived an outdoor life.

The most distinctive thing about him was his smile—the warmest, frankest, most ingratiating smile I’ve ever seen on a man’s face. His gestures were jerky and trembly, which was only natural considering the state of his nerves.

He was all fire and energy, like a man who has just had a shot in the arm. He talked well, too, exceedingly well, as though he might have been a journalist as well as doctor and lawyer. And he was very obviously not trying to make a touch.

When we had walked a block or so he stopped in front of a cheap eating house and invited us to step in with him and have something to eat or drink. We told him we were on our way home, that we were tired and eager to get to bed.

“But only for a few minutes,” he said. “I’m just going to have a quick bite.”

Again we tried to beg off. But he persisted, taking us by the arm and leading us to the door of the café. I repeated that I was going home but suggested to Rattner that he might stay if he liked. I started to disengage myself from his grasp.

“Look,” he said, suddenly putting on a grave air, “you’ve got to do me this little favor. I’ve got to talk to you people. I might do something desperate if you don’t. I’m asking you as a human kindness—you wouldn’t refuse to give a man a little time, would you, when you knew that it meant so much to him?”

With that of course we surrendered without a word. “We’re in for it now,” I thought to myself, feeling a little disgusted with myself for letting myself be tricked by a sentimental drunkard.

“What are you going to have?” he said, ordering himself a plate of ham and beans which, before he had even brought it to the table, he sprinkled liberally with ketchup and chili sauce. As he was about to

remove it from the counter he turned to the server and ordered him to get another plate of ham and beans ready.

“I can eat three or four of these in a row,” he explained, “when I begin to sober up.” We had ordered coffee for ourselves. Rattner was about to take the checks when our friend reached for them and stuck them in his pocket. “This is on me,” he said, “I invited you in here.”

We tried to protest but he silenced us by saying, between huge gulps which he washed down with black coffee, that money was one of the things that never bothered him.

“I don’t know how much I’ve got on me now,” he continued. “Enough for this anyway. I gave my car to a dealer yesterday to sell for me. I drove down here from Idaho with some old cronies from the bench—they were on a jamboree.

I used to be in the legislature once,” and he mentioned some Western State where he had served. “I can ride back free on the railroad,” he added. “I have a pass. I used to be somebody once upon a time. . . .” He interrupted himself to go to the counter and get another helping.

As he sat down again, while dousing the beans with ketchup and chili sauce, he reached with his left hand into his breast pocket and dumped the whole contents of his pocket on the table. “You’re an artist, aren’t you?” he said to Rattner. “And you’re a writer, I can tell that,” he said, looking at me.

“You don’t have to tell me, I sized you both up immediately.” He was pushing the papers about as he spoke, still energetically shoveling down his food, and apparently poking about for some articles which he had written and which he wanted to show us. “I write a bit myself,” he said, “whenever I need a little extra change.

You see, as soon as I get my allowance I go on a bat. Well, when I come out of it I sit down and write some crap for”—and here he mentioned some of the leading magazines, those with the big circulation. “I can

always make a few hundred dollars that way, if I want to. There's nothing to it.

I don't say it's literature, of course. But who wants literature? Now where in the hell is that story I wrote about a psychopathic case . . . I just wanted to show you that I know what I'm talking about. You see. . . .” He broke off suddenly and gave us a rather wry, twisted smile, as though it were hopeless to try to put it all in words.

He had a forkful of beans which he was about to shovel down. He dropped the fork, like an automaton, the beans spilling all over his soiled letters and documents, and leaning over the table he startled me by seizing my arm and placing my hand on his skull, rubbing it roughly back and forth.

“Feel that?” he said, with a queer gleam in his eye. “Just like a washboard, eh?” I pulled my hand away as quickly as I could. The feel of that corrugated brainpan gave me the creeps. “That's just one item,” he said.

And with that he rolled up his sleeve and showed us a jagged wound that ran from the wrist to the elbow. Then he pulled up the leg of his trousers. More horrible wounds. As if that were not enough he stood up quickly, pulled off his coat and, quite as if there were no one but just us three in the place, he opened his shirt and displayed even uglier scars.

As he was putting on his coat he looked boldly around and in clear, ringing tones he sang with terrible bitter mockery “America, I love you!” Just the opening phrase. Then he sat down as abruptly as he had gotten up and quietly proceeded to finish the ham and beans.

I thought there would be a commotion but no, people continued eating and talking just as before, only now we had become the center of attention. The man at the cash register seemed rather nervous and thoroughly undecided as to what to do. I wondered what next.

I half expected our friend to raise his voice and begin a melodramatic scene. Except however for the fact that he had grown a little more high-strung and more voluble his behavior was not markedly different from before.

But his tone had altered. He spoke now in jerky phrases punctuated with the most blasphemous oaths and accompanied by grimaces which were frightening to behold. The demon in him seemed to be coming out. Or rather, the mutilated being who had been wounded and humiliated beyond all human endurance.

“Mister Roosevelt!” he said, his voice full of scorn and contempt. “I was just listening to him over the radio. Getting us in shape to fight England’s battles again, what? Conscription. Not this bird!” and he jerked his thumb backwards viciously. “Decorated three times on the field of battle.

The Argonne . . . Chateau Thierry . . . the Somme . . . concussion of the brain . . . fourteen months in the hospital outside Paris . . . ten months on this side of the water. Making murderers of us and then begging us to settle down quietly and go to work again. . . . Wait a minute, I want to read you a poem I wrote about our Fuehrer the other night.”

He fished among the papers lying about on the table. He got up to get himself another cup of coffee and as he stood with cup in hand, sipping it, he began to read aloud this vituperative, scabrous poem about the President. Surely now, I thought, somebody will take umbrage and start a fight.

I looked at Rattner who believes in Roosevelt, who had travelled 1200 miles to vote for him at the last election. Rattner was silent. He probably thought it useless to remonstrate with a man who had obviously been shell shocked.

Still, I couldn’t help thinking, the situation was a little unusual, to say the least. A phrase I had heard in Georgia came back to my head. It was

from the lips of a woman who had just been to see “Lincoln in Illinois.”
“What are they trying to do—make a he-ro of that man Lincoln?”

Yes, something distinctly pre-Civil War about the atmosphere. A president re-elected to office by a great popular vote and yet his name was anathema to millions. Another Woodrow Wilson perchance? Our friend wouldn't even accord him that ranking.

He had sat down again and in a fairly moderate tone of voice he began making sport of the politicians, the members of the judiciary, the generals and admirals, the quartermaster generals, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Y. M. C. A. A withering play of mockery and cynicism, larded with personal experiences, grotesque encounters, buffoonish pranks which only a battle-scarred veteran would have the audacity to relate.

“And so,” he exploded, “they wanted to parade me like a monkey, with my uniform and medals. They had the brass band out and the mayor all set to give us a glorious welcome. The town is yours, boys, and all that hokum. Our heroes! God, it makes me vomit to think of it. I ripped the medals off my uniform and threw them away. I burned the damned uniform in the fireplace.

Then I got myself a quart of rye and I locked myself in my room. I drank and wept, all by myself. Outside the band was playing and people cheering hysterically. I was all black inside. Everything I had believed in was gone.

All my illusions were shattered. They broke my heart, that's what they did. They didn't leave me a goddamned crumb of solace. Except the booze, of course. Sure, they tried to take that away from me too, at first. They tried to shame me into giving it up.

Shame me, huh! Me who had killed hundreds of men with the bayonet, who lived like an animal and lost all sense of human decency. They can't do anything to shame me, or frighten me, or fool me, or bribe me,

or trick me. I know them inside out, the dirty bastards. They've starved me and beaten me and put me behind the bars.

That stuff doesn't frighten me. I can put up with hunger, cold, thirst, lice, vermin, disease, blows, insults, degradation, fraud, theft, libel, slander, betrayal . . . I've been through the whole works . . . they've tried everything on me . . . and still they can't crush me, can't stop my mouth, can't make me say it's right. I don't want anything to do with these honest, Godfearing people. They sicken me. I'd rather live with animals—or cannibals.”

He found a piece of sheet music among his papers and documents. “There's a song I wrote three years ago. It's sentimental but it won't do anyone any harm. I can only write music when I'm drunk. The alcohol blots out the pain. I've still got a heart, a big one, too.

My world is a world of memories. Do you remember this one?” He began to hum a familiar melody. “You wrote that?” I said, taken by surprise. “Yes, I wrote that—and I wrote others too”—and he began to reel off the titles of his songs.

I was just beginning to wonder about the truth of all these statements—lawyer, doctor, legislator, scrivener, song writer—when he began to talk about his inventions. He had made three fortunes, it seems, before he fell into complete disgrace.

It was getting pretty thick even for me, and I'm a credulous individual, when presently a chance remark he made about a friend of his, a famous architect in the Middle West, drew a surprising response from Rattner.

“He was my buddy in the army,” said Rattner quietly. “Well,” said our friend, “he married my sister.” With this there began a lively exchange of reminiscences between the two of them, leaving not the slightest doubt in my mind that our friend was telling the truth, at least so far as the architect was concerned.

From the architect to the construction of a great house in the center of Texas somewhere was but a step. With the last fortune he made he had bought himself a ranch, married and built himself a fantastic chateau in the middle of nowhere.

The drinking was gradually tailing off. He was deeply in love with his wife and looking forward to raising a family. Well, to make a long story short, a friend of his persuaded him to go to Alaska with him on a mining speculation.

He left his wife behind because he feared the climate would be too rigorous for her. He was away about a year. When he returned—he had come back without warning, thinking to surprise her—he found her in bed with his best friend.

With a whip he drove the two of them out of the house in the dead of night, in a blinding snowstorm, not even giving them a chance to put their clothes on. Then he got the bottle out, of course, and after he had had a few shots he began to smash things up.

But the house was so damned big that he soon grew tired of that sport. There was only one way to make a good job of it and that was to put a match to the works, which he did. Then he got in his car and drove off, not bothering to even pack a valise. A few days later, in a distant State, he picked up the newspaper and learned that his friend had been found dead of exposure.

Nothing was said about the wife. In fact, he never learned what happened to her from that day since. Shortly after this incident he got in a brawl with a man at a bar and cracked his skull open with a broken bottle.

That meant a stretch at hard labor for eighteen months, during which time he made a study of prison conditions and proposed certain reforms to the Governor of the State which were accepted and put into practice.

“I was very popular,” he said. “I have a good voice and I can entertain a bit. I kept them in good spirits while I was there. Later I did another stretch. It doesn’t bother me at all. I can adjust myself to most any conditions.

Usually there’s a piano and a billiard table and books—and if you can’t get anything to drink you can always get yourself a little dope. I switch back and forth. What’s the difference? All a man wants is to forget the present. . . .”

“Yes, but can you ever really forget?” Rattner interjected.

“I can! You just give me a piano, a quart of rye and a sociable little joint and I can be just as happy as a man wants to be. You see, I don’t need all the paraphernalia you fellows require.

All I carry with me is a toothbrush. If I want a shave I buy one; if I want to change my linen I get new linen; when I’m hungry I eat; when I’m tired I sleep. It doesn’t make much difference to me whether I sleep in a bed or on the ground.

If I want to write a story I go to a newspaper office and borrow a machine. If I want to go to Boston all I have to do is show my pass. Any place is home sweet home so long as I can find a place to drink and meet a friendly fellow like myself. I don’t pay taxes and I don’t pay rent.

I have no boss, no responsibilities. I don’t vote and I don’t care who’s President or Vice-President. I don’t want to make money and I don’t look for fame or success. What can you offer me that I haven’t got, eh? I’m a free man—are you? And happy. I’m happy because I don’t care what happens. All I want is my quart of whiskey every day—a bottle of forgetfulness, that’s all. My health?

I never worry about it. I’m just as strong and healthy as the next man. If there’s anything wrong with me I don’t know it. I might live to be a hundred whereas you guys are probably worrying whether you’ll live to be sixty. There’s only one day—today. If I feel good I write a poem and

throw it away the next day. I'm not trying to win any literary prizes—I'm just expressing myself in my own cantankerous way. . . ."

At this point he began to go off the track about his literary ability. His vanity was getting the best of him. When it got to the point where he insisted that I glance at a story he had written for some popular magazine I thought it best to pull him up short. I much preferred to hear about the desperado and the drunkard than the man of letters.

"Look here," I said, not mincing my words, "you admit that this is all crap, don't you? Well, I never read crap. What's the use of showing me that stuff—I don't doubt that you can write as badly as the next fellow—it doesn't take genius to do that.

What I'm interested in is good writing: I admire genius not success. Now if you have anything that you're proud of that's another thing. I'd be glad to read something that you yourself thought well of."

He gave me a long, down-slanting look. For a few long moments he looked at me that way, silently, scrutinizingly. "I'll tell you," he said finally, "there's just one thing I've ever written which I think good—and I've never put it down on paper.

But I've got it up here," and he tapped his forehead with his forefinger. "If you'd like to hear it I'll recite it for you. It's a long poem I wrote one time when I was in Manila. You've heard of Morro Castle, haven't you?

All right, it was just outside the walls of Morro Castle that I got the inspiration. I think it's a great poem. I know it is! I wouldn't want to see it printed. I wouldn't want to take money for it. Here it is. . . ."

Without pausing to clear his throat or take a drink he launched into this poem about the sun going down in Manila. He recited it at a rapid pace in a clear musical voice. It was like shooting down the rapids in a light canoe.

All around us the conversation had died down; some stood up and moved in close the better to hear him. It seemed to have neither beginning nor end. As I say, it had started off at the velocity of a flood, and it went on and on, image upon image, crescendo upon crescendo, rising and falling in musical cadences.

I don't remember a single line of it, more's the pity. All I remember is the sensation I had of being borne along on the swollen bosom of a great river through the heart of a tropical zone in which there was a constant fluttering of dazzling plumage, the sheen of wet green leaves, the bending and swaying of lakes of grass, the throbbing midnight blue of sky, the gleam of stars like coruscating jewels, the song of birds intoxicated by God knows what.

There was a fever running through the lines, the fever not of a sick man but of an exalted, frenzied creature who had suddenly found his true voice and was trying it out in the dark. It was a voice which issued straight from the heart, a taut, vibrant column of blood which fell upon the ear in rhapsodic, thunderous waves.

The end was an abatement rather than a cessation, a diminuendo which brought the pounding rhythm to a whisper that prolonged itself far beyond the actual silence in which it finally merged. The voice had ceased to register, but the poem continued to pulsate in the echoing cells of the brain.

He broke the silence which ensued by alluding modestly to his unusual facility for memorizing whatever caught his eye. "I remember everything I read in school," he said, "from Longfellow and Wordsworth to Ronsard and François Villon.

Villon, there's a fellow after my own heart," and he launched into a familiar verse in an accent that betrayed he had more than a textbook knowledge of French. "The greatest poets were the Chinese," he said. "They made the little things reveal the greatness of the universe. They were philosophers first and then poets. They lived their poetry.

We have nothing to make poetry about, except death and desolation. You can't make a poem about an automobile or a telephone booth. To begin with, the heart has to be intact. One must be able to believe in something. The values we were taught to respect when we were children are all smashed.

We're not men any more—we're automatons. We don't even get any satisfaction in killing. The last war killed off our impulses. We don't respond; we react. We're the lost legion of the defeated archangels. We're dangling in chaos and our leaders, blinder than bats, bray like jackasses. You wouldn't call Mister Roosevelt a great leader, would you?

Not if you know your history. A leader has to be inspired by a great vision; he has to lift his people out of the mire with mighty pinions; he has to rouse them from the stupor in which they vegetate like stoats and slugs.

You don't advance the cause of freedom and humanity by leading poor, feeble dreamers to the slaughterhouse. What's he belly-aching about anyway? Did the Creator appoint him the Saviour of Civilization? When I went over there to fight for Democracy I was just a kid. I didn't have any great ambitions, neither did I have any desire to kill anybody. I was brought up to believe that the shedding of blood was a crime against God and man.

Well, I did what they asked me to, like a good soldier. I murdered every son of a bitch that was trying to murder me. What else could I do? It wasn't all murder, of course. I had some good times now and then—a different sort of pleasure than I ever figured I would like. In fact, nothing was like what I thought it would be before I went over.

You know what those bastards make you into. Why, your own mother wouldn't recognize you if she saw you taking your pleasure—or crawling in the mud and sticking a bayonet in a man who never did you any harm.

I'm telling you, it got so filthy and poisonous I didn't know who I was any more. I was just a number that lit up like a switchboard when the order came to do this, do that, do the other thing. You couldn't call me a man—I didn't have a god-damned bit of feeling left.

And I wasn't an animal because if I had been an animal I'd have had better sense than to get myself into such a mess. Animals kill one another only when they're hungry. We kill because we're afraid of our own shadow, afraid that if we used a little common sense we'd have to admit that our glorious principles were wrong.

Today I haven't got any principles—I'm an outlaw. I have only one ambition left—to get enough booze under my belt every day so as to forget what the world looks like. I never sanctioned this setup. You can't convince me that I murdered all those Germans in order to bring this unholy mess about. No sir, I refuse to take any part in it. I wash my hands of it. I walk out on it.

Now if that makes me a bad citizen why then I'm a bad citizen. So what? Do you suppose if I ran around like a mad dog, begging for a club and a rifle to start murdering all over again, do you suppose that would make me into a good citizen, good enough, what I mean, to vote the straight Democratic ticket?

I suppose if I did that I could eat right out of their hand, what? Well, I don't want to eat out of anybody's hand. I want to be left alone; I want to dream my dreams, to believe as I once believed, that life is good and beautiful and that men can live with one another in peace and plenty.

No son of a bitch on earth can tell me that to make life better you have to first kill a million or ten million men in cold blood. No sir, those bastards haven't got any heart. I know the Germans are no worse than we are, and by Christ, I know from experience that some of them at least are a damned sight better than the French or the English.

“That schoolteacher we made a President of, he thought he had everything fixed just right, didn't he? Can you picture him crawling

around on the floor at Versailles like an old billygoat, putting up imaginary fences with a blue pencil?

What's the sense of making new boundaries, will you tell me? Why tariffs and taxes and sentry boxes and pillboxes anyway? Why doesn't England part with some of her unlawful possessions? If the poor people in England can't make a living when the government possesses the biggest empire that ever was how are they going to make a living when the empire falls to pieces? Why don't they emigrate to Canada or Africa or Australia?

"There's another thing I don't understand. We always assume that we're in the right, that we have the best government under the sun. How do we know—have we tried the others out? Is everything running so beautifully here that we couldn't bear the thought of a change? Supposing I honestly believed in Fascism or Communism or polygamy or Mohammedanism or pacifism or any of the things that are now tabu in this country?

What would happen to me if I started to open my trap, eh? Why you don't even dare to protest against being vaccinated, though there's plenty of evidence to prove that vaccination does more harm than good. Where is this liberty and freedom we boast about? You're only free if you're in good odor with your neighbors, and even then it's not a hell of a lot of rope they give you.

If you happen to be broke and out of a job your freedom isn't worth a button. And if you're old besides then it's just plain misery. They're much kinder to animals and flowers and crazy people. Civilization is a blessing to the unfit and the degenerate—the others it breaks or demoralizes.

As far as the comforts of life go I'm better off when I'm in jail than when I'm out. In the one case they take your freedom away and in the other they take your manhood. If you play the game you can have automobiles and town houses and mistresses and pâté de foie gras and all the folde-rol that goes with it.

But who wants to play the game? Is it worth it? Did you ever see a millionaire who was happy or who had any self-respect? Did you ever go to Washington and see our lawbreakers—excuse me, I mean lawmakers—in session?

There's a sight for you! If you dressed them in striped dungarees and put them behind the bars with pick and shovel nobody on earth could tell but what they belonged there. Or take that rogues' gallery of Vice-Presidents.

I was standing in front of a drug store not so long ago studying their physiognomies. There never was a meaner, craftier, uglier, more fanatical bunch of human faces ever assembled in one group.

And that's the stuff they make presidents of whenever there's an assassination. Yes, assassinations. I was sitting in a restaurant the day after the election—up in Maine it was—and the fellow next to me was trying to lay a bet with another guy that Roosevelt wouldn't last the term out.

He was laying five to one—but nobody would take him up. The thing that struck me was that the waitress, whom nobody had paid any attention to, suddenly remarked in a quiet tone that 'we were about due for another assassination.'

Assassinations seem ugly when it's the President of the United States but there's plenty of assassinating going on all the time and nobody seems to get very riled up about it. Where I was raised we used to flog a nigger to death just to show a visitor how it's done. It's still being done, but not so publicly, I suppose. We improve things by covering them up.

"You take the food they hand us. . . . Of course I haven't got any taste left, from all the booze I pour down my system. But a man who has any taste buds left must be in a hell of a way eating the slop they hand you in public places. Now they're discovering that the vitamins are missing.

So what do they do? Do they change the diet, change the chef? No, they give you the same rotten slop only they add the necessary vitamins.

That's civilization—always doing things assways. Well, I'll tell you, I'm so god-damned civilized now that I prefer to take my poison straight. If I had lived what they call a 'normal' life I'd be on the dump heap by fifty anyway. I'm forty-eight now and sound as a whistle, always doing just the opposite of what they recommend. If you were to live the way I do for two weeks you'd be in the hospital. So what does it add up to, will you tell me?

If I didn't drink I'd have some other vice—a baby-snatcher, maybe, or a refined Jack-the-Ripper, who knows? And if I didn't have any vices I'd be just a poor sap, a sucker like millions of others, and where would that get me? Do you think I'd get any satisfaction out of dying in harness, as they say? Not me! I'd rather die in the alcoholic ward among the has-beens and no-goods.

At least, if it happens that way, I'll have the satisfaction of saying that I had only one master—John Barleycorn. You have a thousand masters, perfidious, insidious ones who torment you even in your sleep. I've only got one, and to tell the truth he's more like a friend than a taskmaster. He gets me into some nasty messes, but he never lies to me.

He never says 'freedom, liberty, equality' or any of that rot. He just says, 'I will make you so stinking drunk that you won't know who you are,' and that's all I crave. Now if Mister Roosevelt or any other politician could make me a promise and keep it I'd have a little respect for him. But who ever heard of a diplomat or a politician keeping his word? It's like expecting a millionaire to give his fortune away to the men and women he robbed it from. It just ain't done."

He went on at this rate without a letup—long monologues about the perfidy, the cruelty and the injustice of man towards man. Really a grand fellow at heart, with good instincts and all the attributes of a citizen of the world, except for the fact that somewhere along the line

he had been flung out of the societal orbit and could never get back into it again.

I saw from the queries which Rattner interjected now and then that he had hopes for the man. At two in the morning he was optimistic enough to believe that with a little perseverance there might be sown in this rugged heart the seed of hope. To me, much as I liked the fellow, it seemed just as futile as to attempt to reclaim the bad lands of Arizona or Dakota.

The only thing society can do with such people, and it never does, is to be kind and indulgent to them. Just as the earth itself, in its endless experiments, comes to a dead end in certain regions, gives up, as it were, so with individuals.

The desire to kill the soul, for that's what it amounts to, is a phenomenon which has an extraordinary fascination for me. Sometimes it lends a grandeur to an individual which seems to rival the sublime struggles of those men whom we consider superior types.

Because the gesture of negation, when pure and uncompromising, has also in it the qualities of the heroic. Weaklings are incapable of flinging themselves away in this manner. The weakling merely succumbs while the other, more single-minded character works hand and glove with Fate, egging it on, as it were, and mocking it at the same time. To invoke Fate is to expose oneself to the chaos which the blind forces of the universe are ever ready to set in motion once the will of man is broken.

The man of destiny is the extreme opposite: in him we have an example of the miraculous nature of man, in that those same blind forces appear to be harnessed and controlled, directed towards the fulfillment of man's own microscopic purpose.

But to act either way one has to lift himself completely out of the set, reactionary pattern of the ordinary individual. Even to vote for self-destruction demands something of a cosmic approach.

A man has to have some definite view of the nature of the world in order to reject it. It is far easier to commit suicide than to kill the soul. There remains the doubt, which not even the most determined destroyer can annihilate, that the task is impossible.

If it could be accomplished by an act of will then there would be no need to summon Fate. But it is precisely because the will no longer functions that the hopeless individual surrenders to the powers that be.

In short he is obliged to renounce the one act which would deliver him of his torment. Our friend had delivered himself up to John Barleycorn. But beyond a certain point John Barleycorn is powerless to operate.

Could one succeed in summoning all the paralyzing and inhibiting forces of the universe there would still remain a frontier, a barrier which nothing but man himself can surmount and invade. The body can be killed, but the soul is imperishable.

A man like our friend could have killed himself a thousand times had he the least hope of solving his problem thereby. But he had chosen to relapse, to lie cold and inert like the moon, to crush every fructifying impulse and, by imitating death, finally achieve it in the very heart of his being.

When he spoke it was the heart which cried out. They had broken his heart, he said, but it was not true. The heart cannot be broken. The heart can be wounded and cause the whole universe to appear as one vast writhing place of anguish. But the heart knows no limits in its ability to endure suffering and torment.

Were it otherwise the race would have perished long ago. As long as the heart pumps blood it pumps life. And life can be lived at levels so utterly disparate one from another that in some cases it would appear to be almost extinct.

There are just as violent contrasts in the way life is lived by human beings as there are startling contrasts in the fish, the mineral or the vegetable worlds. When we use the term human society we speak of something which defies definition. No one can encompass the thought and behavior of man with a word or phrase.

Human beings move in constellations which, unlike the stars, are anything but fixed. A story, such as I am relating, can be of interest or significance to certain clusters of men and totally devoid of any charm or value to others. What would Shakespeare mean to a Patagonian, assuming he could be taught to read the words?

What can "The Varieties of Religious Experience" mean to a Hopi Indian? A man goes along thinking the world to be thus and so, simply because he has never been jolted out of the rut in which he crawls like a worm. For the civilized man war is not always the greatest jolt to his smug every day pattern.

Some men, and their number is greater I fear than most of us would like to believe, find war an exciting if not altogether agreeable interruption to the toil and drudgery of common life. The presence of death adds spice, quickens their usually torpid brain cells.

But there are others, like our friend who, in their revolt against wanton killing, in the bitter realization that no power of theirs will ever put an end to it, elect to withdraw from society and if possible destroy even the chance of returning to earth again at some distant and more propitious moment in human history. They want nothing more to do with man; they want to nip the experiment in the bud. And of course they are just as powerless here as in their efforts to eliminate war.

But they are a fascinating species of man and ultimately of value to the race, if for no other reason than that they act as semaphores in those periods of darkness when we seem to be rushing headlong to destruction. The one who operates the switchboard remains invisible and it is in him we put our trust, but as long as we hug the rails the

flashing semaphores offer a fleeting consolation. We hope that the engineer will bring us safely to our destination.

We sit with arms folded and surrender our safekeeping to other hands. But even the best engineer can only take us over a chartered course. Our adventure is in uncharted realms, with courage, intelligence and faith as our only guides.

If we have a duty it is to put our trust in our own powers. No man is great enough or wise enough for any of us to surrender our destiny to. The only way in which any one can lead us is to restore to us the belief in our own guidance. The greatest men have always reaffirmed this thought.

But the men who dazzle us and lead us astray are the men who promise us those things which no man can honestly promise another—namely safety, security, peace, etc. And the most deceptive of all such promisers are those who bid us kill one another in order to attain the fictive goal.

Like our friend, thousands, perhaps millions of men, awaken to the realization of their error on the battlefield. When it is too late. When the men whom they no longer have a desire to kill are already upon them, ready to cut their throats. Then it is kill or be killed and whether one kills in the knowledge of the truth or without that knowledge makes little difference. The murdering goes on—until the day the sirens scream their announcement of a truce.

When peace comes it descends upon a world too exhausted to show any reaction except a dumb feeling of relief. The men at the helm, who were spared the horrors of combat, now play their ignominious role in which greed and hatred rival one another for mastery.

The men who bore the brunt of the struggle are too sickened and disgusted to show any desire to participate in the rearrangement of the world. All they ask is to be left alone to enjoy the luxury of the petty, workaday rhythm which once seemed so dull and barren.

How different the new order would be if we could consult the veteran instead of the politician! But logic has it that we ordain innocent millions to slaughter one another, and when the sacrifice is completed, we authorize a handful of bigoted, ambitious men who have never known what it is to suffer to rearrange our lives. What chance has a lone individual to dissent when he has nothing to sanction his protest except his wounds?

Who cares about wounds when the war is over? Get them out of sight, all these wounded and maimed and mutilated! Resume work! Take up life where you left off, those of you who are still strong and able!

The dead will be given monuments; the mutilated will be pensioned off. Let's get on—business as usual and no feeble sentimentality about the horrors of war. When the next war comes we'll be ready for them! Und so weiter. . . .

I was reflecting thus while he and Rattner were exchanging anecdotes about their experiences in France. I was dying to get to bed. Our friend, on the other hand, was obviously becoming more awake; I knew that with the least encouragement he would regale us till dawn with his stories.

The more he talked about his misfortunes, oddly enough, the more cheerful he seemed to grow. By the time we managed to persuade him to leave the place he was positively radiant. Out in the street he began bragging again about his wonderful condition—liver, kidneys, bowels, lungs all perfect, eyes super-normal. He had forgotten evidently about his broken glasses, or perhaps that was just an invention by way of breaking the ice.

We had a few blocks to walk before reaching our hotel. He said he would accompany us because he was going to turn in soon himself. There were some thirty-five cent lodging houses in the vicinity, he thought, where he'd get a few hours sleep. Every few steps, it seemed,

he stopped dead and planted himself in front of us to expatiate on some incident which he evidently thought it important for us to hear.

Or was it an unconscious desire to delay us in nestling down to our warm cozy beds? More than once, when we finally neared the hotel, we held out our hands to say good night, only to drop them again and stand patiently with one foot in the gutter and one on the curb hearing him out to the end.

At last I began to wonder if he had the necessary pence to get himself a flop. Just as I was about to inquire Rattner, whose thoughts were evidently running in the same direction, anticipated me.

Had he the money for a room? Why, he was pretty certain he did; he had counted his change at the restaurant. Yes, he was quite sure he had enough—and if he hadn't he would ask us to make it up. Anyhow, that wasn't important. What was he saying?

Oh yes, about Nevada . . . about the crazy ghost towns he had lived in . . . the saloon made of beer bottles and the mechanical piano from the Klondike which he rolled out to the desert one night just to hear how it would sound in that great empty space. Yes, the only people worth talking to were the bar flies. They were all living in the past, like himself. Some day he'd write the whole thing out. "Why bother to do that?"

I interposed. "Maybe you're right," he said, running his tobacco-stained fingers through his thick curly hair. "I'm going to ask you for a cigarette now," he said. "I'm all out of mine."

As we lit the cigarette for him he launched into another tale. "Listen," I said, "make it short, will you. I'm dead tired." We moved at a snail-like pace across the street to the door of the hotel. As he was winding up his story I put my hand on the handle of the door in readiness to make a break.

We started to shake hands again when suddenly he took it into his head to count his change. “I guess I’ll have to borrow three cents from you,” he said. “You can have a couple of bucks if you like,” we both started to say simultaneously. No, he didn’t want that—that might start him drinking all over again. He didn’t want to begin that now—he wanted a little rest first.

There was nothing to do but give him the three cents and what cigarettes we had left. It hurt Rattner to hand him three pennies. “Why don’t you take a half dollar at least?” he said. “You might use it for breakfast tomorrow.”

“If you give me a half dollar,” he said, “I’ll probably buy some candles and put them at Robert E. Lee’s monument up the street. It was his birthday today, you know. People have forgotten about him already.

Everybody’s snoring now. I sort of like Lee; I revere his memory. He was more than a great general—he was a man of great delicacy and understanding. As a matter of fact, I think I’ll wander up there anyway before turning in. It’s just the sort of fool thing a fellow like me would do.

Sleep isn’t so important. I’ll go up there to the monument and talk to him a little while. Let the world sleep! You see. I’m free to do as I please. I’m really better off than a millionaire. . . .”

“Then there’s nothing more we can do for you?” I said, cutting him short. “You’ve got everything you need, you’ve got your health, you’re happy. . . .”

I had no more than uttered the word happy when his face suddenly changed and, grasping me by both arms with a steely grip, he wheeled me around and gazing into my eyes with a look I shall never forget, he broke forth: “Happy? Listen, you’re a writer—you should know better than that. You know I’m lying like hell. Happy?”

Why, brother, you're looking at the most miserable man on earth." He paused a moment to brush away a tear. He was still holding me firmly with both hands, determined apparently that I should hear him out. "I didn't bump into you accidentally tonight," he continued. "I saw you coming along and I sized you both up.

I knew you were artists and that's why I collared you. I always pick the people I want to talk to. I didn't lose any glasses at the bar, nor did I give my car to a dealer to sell for me.

But everything else I told you is true. I'm just hoofing it from place to place. I've only been out of the pen a few weeks. They've got their eye on me still—somebody's been trailing me around town, I know it. One false move and they'll clap me back in again.

I'm giving them the runaround. If I should go up to the circle now and accidentally fall asleep on a bench they'd have the goods on me. But I'm too wary for that. I'll just amble about leisurely and when I'm good and ready I'll turn in. The bartender'll fix me up in the morning. . . . Look, I don't know what kind of stuff you write, but if you'll take a tip from me the thing to do is to learn what it is to suffer. No writer is any good unless he's suffered. . . ."

At this point Rattner was about to say something in my behalf, but I motioned to him to be silent. It was a strange thing for me to be listening to a man urging me to suffer. I had always been of the opinion that I had had more than my share of suffering. Evidently it didn't show on my face.

Or else the fellow was so engrossed with his own misfortunes that he was unable or unwilling to recognize the marks in another. So I let him ramble on. I listened to the last drop without once seeking to interrupt him.

When he had finished I held out my hand for the last time to say good-bye. He took my hand in both of his and clasped it warmly. "I've talked your head off, haven't I?" he said, that strange ecstatic smile lighting up

his face. "Look, my name is So-and-So." It sounded like Allison or Albertson.

He began digging for his wallet. "I'd like to give you an address," he said, "where you could drop me a line." He was searching for something to write on, but couldn't seem to find a card or blank piece of paper among the litter of documents he earned in that thick wallet. "Well, you give me yours," he said. "That will do. I'll write you some time."

Rattner was writing out his name and address for the fellow. He took the card and put it carefully in his wallet. He waited for me to write mine.

"I have no address," I said. "Besides, we've got nothing more to say to each other. I don't think we'll ever meet again. You're bent on destroying yourself, and I can't stop you, nor can anybody else. What's the good of pretending that we'll write one another?"

Tomorrow I'll be somewhere else and so will you. All I can say is I wish you luck." With that I pulled the door open and walked into the lobby of the hotel. Rattner was still saying good-bye to him.

As I stood there waiting for the elevator boy he waved his hand cheerily. I waved back. Then he stood a moment, swaying on his heels and apparently undecided whether to go towards the monument or turn round and look for a flop. Just as the elevator boy started the lift going he signalled for us to wait.

I signalled back that it was too late. "Go on up," I said to the boy. As we rose up out of sight our friend stood there in front of the hotel door peering up at us with a blank expression. I didn't feel that it was a lousy thing to do, leave him standing there like that. I looked at Rattner to see how he felt about it.

He sort of shrugged his shoulders. "What can you do with a guy like that?" he said, "he won't let you help him." As we entered the room

and turned on the lights, he added: “You surely did give him a jolt when you told him he was happy. Do you know what I thought he was going to do?”

I thought he was going to crack you. Did you notice the look that came over him? And when you refused to give him your name and address, well that just about finished him. I couldn’t do that. I’m not reproaching you—I just wonder why you acted that way. You could just as well have let him down easy, couldn’t you?”

I was about to smile, but so many thoughts entered my head at once that I forgot and instead I frowned.

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Rattner, misinterpreting my expression. “I think you were damned patient with him. You hardly said a word all evening. . . .”

“No, it’s not that,” I said. “I’m not thinking of myself. I’m thinking of all the fellows like him I’ve met in one short lifetime. Listen, did I ever tell you about my experience with the telegraph company? Hell, it’s late and I know you’re fagged out.

So am I. But I just want to tell you one or two things. I’m not trying to defend myself, mind you. I’m guilty, if you like. Maybe I could have done something, said something—I don’t know what or how.

Sure, I did let him down. And what’s more I probably hurt him deeply. But I figured it would do him good, if you can believe that. I never crossed him once, did I, or criticized him, or urged him to change his ways?

No, I never do that. If a man is determined to go to the dogs I help him—I give him a little push if needs be. If he wants to get on his feet I help him to do that. Whatever he asks for. I believe in letting a man do as he pleases, for good or bad, because eventually well all wind up in the same place.

But what I was starting to tell you is this—I've heard so many terrible tales, met so many guys like this Allison or Albertson, that I've hardly got an ounce of sympathy left in me. That's a horrible thing to say, but it's true.

Get this—in one day, sometimes, I've had as many as a half-dozen men break down and weep before me, beg me to do something for them, or if not for them, for their wives and children. In four years I hardly ever had more than four or five hours' sleep a night, largely because I was trying to help people who were helpless to help themselves. What money I earned I gave away; when I couldn't give a man a job myself I went to my friends and begged them to give a man the work he needed.

I brought them home and fed them; I fixed them up on the floor when the beds were full. I got hell all around for doing too much and neglecting my own wife and child. My boss looked upon me as a fool, and instead of praising me for my efforts bawled hell out of me continually.

I was always between two fires, from above and from below. I saw finally that no matter how much I did it was just a drop in the bucket. I'm not saying that I grew indifferent or hardened. No, but I realized that it would take a revolution to make any appreciable change in conditions.

And when I say a revolution I mean a real revolution, something far more radical and sweeping than the Russian revolution, for instance. I still think that, but I don't think it can be done politically or economically. Governments can't bring it about.

Only individuals, each one working in his own quiet way. It must be a revolution of the heart. Our attitude towards life has to be fundamentally altered. We've got to advance to another level, a level from which we can take in the whole earth with one glance. We have to have a vision of the globe, including all the people who inhabit it—down to the lowest and the most primitive man.

“To come back to our friend. . . . I wasn’t too unkind to him, was I? You know damned well I’ve never refused a man help when he asked for it. But he didn’t want help. He wanted sympathy. He wanted us to try to dissuade him from accomplishing his own destruction.

And when he had melted us with his heartbreaking stories he wanted to have the pleasure of saying no and leaving us high and dry. He gets a kick out of that. A quiet sort of revenge, as it were, for his inability to cure himself of his sorrows.

I figure it doesn’t help a man any to encourage him in that direction. If a woman gets hysterical you know that the best thing to do is to slap her face good and hard. The same with these poor devils: they’ve got to be made to understand that they are not the only ones in the world who are suffering.

They make a vice of their suffering. An analyst might cure him—and again he might not. And in any case, how would you get him to the analyst? You don’t suppose he’d listen to a suggestion of that sort, do you?

If I hadn’t been so tired, and if I had had more money. I’d have tried another line with him. I’d have bought him some booze—not just a bottle, but a case of whiskey, two cases or three, if I were able to afford it. I tried that once on a friend of mine—another confirmed drunkard. Do you know, he was so damned furious when he saw all that liquor that he never opened a single bottle. He was insulted, so he pretended. It didn’t faze me in the least.

I had gotten rather fed up with his antics. When he was sober he was a prince, but when he got drunk he was just impossible. Well, thereafter, every time he came to see me, as soon as he suggested a little drink, I poured out a half dozen glasses at once for him.

While he was debating whether to touch it or not I would excuse myself and run out to buy more. It worked—in his case, at least. It cost me his

friendship, to be sure, but it stopped him from playing the drunkard with me.

They've tried similar things in certain prisons I know of. They don't force a man to work, if he doesn't want to. On-the contrary, they give him a comfortable cell, plenty to eat, cigars, cigarettes, wine or beer, according to his taste, a servant to wait on him, anything he wants save his freedom. After a few days of it the fellow usually begs to be permitted to work.

A man just can't stand having too much of a good thing. Give a man all he wants and more and you'll cure him of his appetites in nine cases out of ten. It's so damned simple—it's strange we don't take advantage of such ideas."

When I had crawled into bed and turned out the light I found that I was wide awake. Often, when I've listened to a man for a whole evening, turning myself into a receiving station, I lie awake and rehearse the man's story from beginning to end.

I like to see how accurately I can retrace the innumerable incidents which a man can relate in the course of several hours, especially if he is given free rein. I almost always think of such talks as a big tree with limbs and branches and leaves and buds.

Roots, too, which have their grip in the common soil of human experience and which make any story, no matter how fantastic or incredible, quite plausible, provided you give the man the time and attention he demands.

The most wonderful thing, to carry the image further, is the buds: these are the little incidents which like seeds a man will often plant in your mind to blossom later when the memory of him is almost lost.

Some men are particularly skillful in handling these buds; they actually seem to possess the power to graft them on to your own story-telling tree so that when they blossom forth you imagine that they were your

own, though you never cease marveling that your own little brain could have produced such astonishing fruit.

As I say, I was turning it all over in my mind and chuckling to myself to think how clever I was to have detected certain definite falsifications, certain distortions and omissions which, when one is listening intently, one seldom catches.

Presently I recalled how he had admitted some slight fabrications only to emphasize that the rest of his yarn was pure wool. At this point I chuckled aloud. Rattner was tossing about, evidently no more able than I to close his eyes.

“Are you still awake?” I asked quietly.

He gave a grunt.

“Listen,” I said, “there’s one thing I want to ask you—do you believe he was telling the truth about himself?”

Rattner, too tired I suppose to go into any subtleties of analysis, began to hem and haw. In the main he thought the fellow had been telling us the truth. “Why, didn’t you believe him?” he asked.

“You remember,” I said, “when I touched him to the quick . . . you remember how sincerely he spoke? Well, it was at that moment that I doubted him. At that moment he told us the biggest lie of all—when he said that the rest was all true. I don’t believe that any of it was true, not even the story about knowing your friend. You remember how quickly he married him off to his sister? That was sheer spontaneous invention.

I was tracing it all back just now. And I remembered very distinctly how, when you were discussing your friend the architect, he always told his part after you had made a few remarks. He was getting his clue from you all the time.

He’s very agile and he’s certainly fertile, I’ll say that for him, but I don’t believe a damned thing he told us, except perhaps that he was in the

army and got badly bunged up. Even that, of course, could have been trumped up.

Did you ever feel a head that was trepanned? That seems like solid fact, of course, and yet somehow, I don't know just why, I could doubt even what my fingers told me. When a man has an inventive brain like his he could tell you anything and make it sound convincing.

Mind you, it doesn't make his story any less real, as far as I'm concerned. Whether all those things happened or not, they're true just the same. A minute ago, when I was mulling it over to myself, I caught myself deforming certain incidents, certain remarks he made, in order to make the story a better story. Not to make it more truthful, but more true, if you see the difference. I had it all figured out, how I would tell it myself, if I ever got down to it. . . ."

Rattner began to protest that I was too sweeping in my judgment, which only served to remind me of the marvelous poem he had recited for us.

"I say," I began again, "what would you think if I told you that the poem which he got off with such gusto was somebody else's? Would that shock you?"

"You mean you recognized it—you had heard it before?"

"No, I don't mean to say that, but I'm damned sure he was not the author of it. Why did he talk about his unusual memory immediately afterwards—didn't that strike you as rather strange? He could have spoken about a thousand things, but no, he had to speak of that. Besides, he recited it too well.

Poets aren't usually so good at reciting their own things. Very few poets remember their verses, particularly if they're long ones such as his was. To recite a poem with such feeling a man has to admire it greatly and a poet, once he's written a poem out, forgets it.

In any case, he wouldn't be going around spouting it aloud to every Tom, Dick and Harry he meets. A bad poet might, but then that poem wasn't written by a bad poet. And furthermore, a poem like that couldn't have been written by a man like our friend who boasted so glibly about turning out crap for the magazines whenever he needed to earn an honest or a dishonest penny. No, he memorized that poem because it was just the sort of thing he would like to have written himself and couldn't. I'm sure of it."

"There's something to what you say there," said Rattner sleepily. He sighed and turned over, his face towards the wall. In a jiffy he had turned round again and was sitting bolt upright.

"What's the matter," I asked, "what hit you?"

"Why my friend what's his name . . . you know, the architect who was my buddy. Who mentioned his name first—he did, didn't he? Well, how could he be lying then?"

"That's easy," I said. "Your friend's name is known to millions of people. He selected it just because it was a well-known name; he thought it would add tone to his story. That was when he was talking about his inventions, you remember? He just made a stab in the dark—and happened to strike your friend."

"He seemed to know a hell of a lot about him," said Rattner, still unconvinced.

"Well, don't you know lots of things about people whom you've never met? Why, if a man is any kind of celebrity we often know more about him than he does himself. Besides, this bird may have run into him at a bar some time or other. What sounded fishy to me was marrying him off to his sister right away."

"Yep, he was taking a big chance there," said Rattner, "knowing that I had been such an intimate friend."

“But you had already told him you hadn’t seen each other since you were buddies together, don’t forget that. Why he could have given him not only a wife but a half dozen children besides—you wouldn’t be able to disprove it. Anyway, that’s one thing we can check up on. I do wish you’d write to your friend and see if he knows this guy or not.”

“You bet I will,” said Rattner, getting out of bed at once and looking for his notebook. “You’ve got me all worked up about it now. Jesus, what licks me is that you could have entertained such suspicions and listened to him the way you did. You looked at him as though he were handing you the Gospel. I didn’t know you were such an actor.”

“I’m not,” I hastened to put in. “At the time I really believed every word he was telling us. Or, to be more exact, I never stopped to think whether what he was saying was so or not so.

When a story is good I listen, and if it develops afterwards that it was a lie why so much the better—I like a good lie just as much as the truth. A story is a story, whether it’s based on fact or fancy.”

“Now I’d like to ask you a question,” Rattner put in. “Why do you suppose he was so sore at Roosevelt?”

“I don’t think he was half so sore as he pretended to be,” I answered promptly. “I think his sole motive for introducing Roosevelt’s name was to get us to listen to that scurrilous poem he had cooked up. You noticed, I hope, that there was no comparison between the two poems.

He wrote the one on Roosevelt, that I’m positive of. Only a bar-fly could cook up such ingenious nonsense. He probably hasn’t anything against Roosevelt. He wanted us to admire the poem and then, failing to get a reaction from us, he got his wires crossed and connected Roosevelt with Woodrow Wilson, the demon who sent him to hell.”

“He certainly had a vicious look when he was talking about the war,” said Rattner. “I don’t doubt him for a minute when he said he had

murdered plenty of men. I wouldn't want to run across him in the dark when he was in a bad mood."

"Yes, there I agree with you," I said. "I think the reason he was so bitter about killing was that he was a killer himself . . . I was almost going to say a killer by nature, but I take that back.

What I do think, though, is that the experience in the trenches often brings out the killer in a man. We're all killers, only most of us never get a chance to cultivate the germ. The worst killers, of course, are the ones who stay at home. They can't help it, either. The soldier gets a chance to vent his feelings, but the man who stays at home has no outlet for his passions.

They ought to kill off the newspaper men right at the start, that's my idea. Those are the men who inspire the killing. Hitler is a pure, clean-hearted idealist compared to those birds. I don't mean the correspondents. I mean the editors and the stuffed shirts who order the editors to write the poison that they hand out."

"You know," said Rattner, in a soft, reflective voice, "there was only one man I felt like killing when I was in the service—and that was the lieutenant, the second-lieutenant, of our company."

"Don't tell me," I said. "I've heard that same story a thousand times. And it's always a lieutenant. Nobody with any self-respect wants to be a lieutenant. They all have inferiority complexes. Many of them get shot in the back, I'm told."

"Worse than that sometimes," said Rattner. "This chap I'm telling you about, why I can't imagine anyone being hated more than he was—not only by us but by his superiors. The officers loathed him. Anyway, let me finish telling you about him. . . . You see, when we were finally demobilized everybody was gunning for him. I knew some fellows who came all the way to New York from Texas and California to look him up and take a poke at him.

And when I say a poke I don't mean just a poke—I mean to beat the piss out of him. I don't know whether it's true or not, but the story I heard later on was this, that he was beaten up so often and so badly that finally he changed his name and moved to another state. You can imagine what what's his name would have done to a guy like that, can't you? I don't think he's have bothered to soil his hands.

I think he'd have plugged him or else cracked him over the head with a bottle. And if he'd have had to swing for it I don't think he would have batted an eyelash. Did you notice how smoothly he passed over that story about cracking a friend with a broken bottle?

He told it as though it were incidental to something else—it rang true to me. If it had been a lie he would have made more of it. But he told it as though he were neither ashamed nor proud of doing what he did. He was just giving us the facts, that's all."

I lay on my back, when we had ceased talking, with eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Certain phrases which our friend had dropped returned obsessively to plague me. The collection of vicepresidents of the United States, which he had so accurately described, was a most persistent image.

I was trying my damndest to recall in what town I too had seen this collection in a drugstore window. Chattanooga, most likely. And yet it couldn't have been Chattanooga either, because in the same window there was a large photograph of Lincoln. I remembered how my eye had flitted back and forth from the rogues' gallery of vice-presidents to the portrait of Lincoln's wife.

I had felt terribly sorry for Lincoln at that moment, not because he had been assassinated but because he had been saddled with that crazy bitch of a wife who almost drove him insane. Yes, as the woman from Georgia had said, we were trying to make a he-ro of him.

And yet for all the good he had tried to do he had caused a lot of harm. He almost wrecked the country. As for Lee, on the other hand, there

was no division of opinion throughout the country as to the greatness of his soul. As time goes on the North becomes more enamored of him. . . . The killing—that's what I couldn't fathom.

What had it accomplished? I wondered if our friend had really gone up to the circle and held communion with the spirit of the man he revered. And then what? Then he had gone to a cheap lodging house and fought with the bed bugs until dawn, was that it?

And the next day and the day after? Legions of them floating around. And me priding myself on my detective ability, getting all worked up because I uncovered a few flaws in his story. A revolution of the heart!

Fine phrase, that, but meanwhile I'm lying comfortably between clean warm sheets. I'm lying here making emendations in his story so that when I come to put it down on paper it will sound more authentic than the authentic one. Trying to kid myself that if I tell the story real well perhaps it will make people more kindly and tolerant towards such poor devils.

Rot! All rot! There are the people who give and forgive without stint, without question, and there are the other kind who always know how to muster a thousand reasons for withholding their aid. The latter never graduate into the former class. Never.

The gulf between them is as wide as hell. One is born kind, indulgent, forgiving, tolerant, merciful. One isn't made that way through religion or education. Carry it out to the year 56,927 A.D. and still there will be the two classes of men. And between the two there will always be a shadow world, the world of ghostly creatures who toss about in vain, walking the streets in torment while the world sleeps. . . .

It wasn't so long ago that I was walking in that same shadow world myself. I used to walk around in the dead of night begging for coppers so that I could fill my empty belly. And one night in the rain, walking with head down and full of nothing but misery, I run plump into a man

with a cape and an opera hat and in a faint, cheerless voice I beg in my customary way for a few pence.

And without stopping, without even looking at me, the man from the opera digs in his vest pocket, pulls out a handful of change and flings it at me. The money rolls all over the sidewalk and into the gutter.

Suddenly I straightened up, stiff and taut with anger. Suddenly I was completely out of the coma, snorting like a bull and ready to charge. I waved my fist and shouted in the direction the man had taken, but there was no sight or sound of him.

He had vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared. I stood there a moment or so undecided what to do, whether to run after him and vent my spleen or quietly set about searching for the shower of coins he had flung at me.

Presently I was laughing hysterically. Run after him, bawl him out, challenge him to a duel? Why, he wouldn't even recognize me! I was a nonentity to him, just a voice in the dark asking for alms. I drew myself up still more erect and took a deep breath.

I looked around calmly and deliberately. The street was empty, not even a cab rolling along. I felt strong and chastened, as if I had just taken a whipping I deserved. "You bastard," I said aloud, looking in the direction of my invisible benefactor, "I'm going to thank you for this! You don't know what you've done for me. Yes sir, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I'm cured." And laughing quietly, trembling with thanksgiving, I got down on my hands and knees in the rain and began raking in the wet coins.

Those which had rolled into the gutter were covered with mud. I washed them carefully in a little pool of rain water near a post of the elevated line. Then I counted them slowly and deliciously.

Thirty-six cents altogether. A tidy sum. The cellar where we lived was near by. I brought the bright clean coins home to my wife and showed them to her triumphantly. She looked at me as if I had gone out of my head.

“Why did you wash them?” she said nervously.

“Because they had fallen in the gutter,” I answered. “An angel with an opera hat left them there for me. He was in too much of a hurry to pick them up for me. . . .”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” said my wife, eyeing me anxiously.

“I never felt better in my life,” I said. “I’ve just been humiliated, beaten, dragged in the mud and washed in the blood of the Lamb. I’m hungry, are you? Let’s eat.”

And so at 3:10 of an Easter morning we sallied forth from the dungeon arm in arm and ordered two hamburgers and coffee at the greasy spoon cafeteria on Myrtle Avenue corner of Fulton Street.

I was never so wide awake in my life, and after I had offered up a short prayer to St. Anthony I made a vow to remain wide awake and if possible to wake up the whole world, saying in conclusion Amen! and wiping my mouth with a paper napkin.

The end